Hannibal the killer whale

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Hannibal the killer whale

by ChemFreak

Summary

Marine biologist Will Graham is asked for advice on a mysterious case. Apparently, an orca is involved in the deaths of several people at an amusement park. Disturbed by this atypical behavior, Will agrees to take the case.
But not everything is as it seems in Vergers WaterWorld. The owner is shady, the vet is suspiciously cooperative and the star of the park, an orca named Hannibal, is hiding a dark secret...

Notes

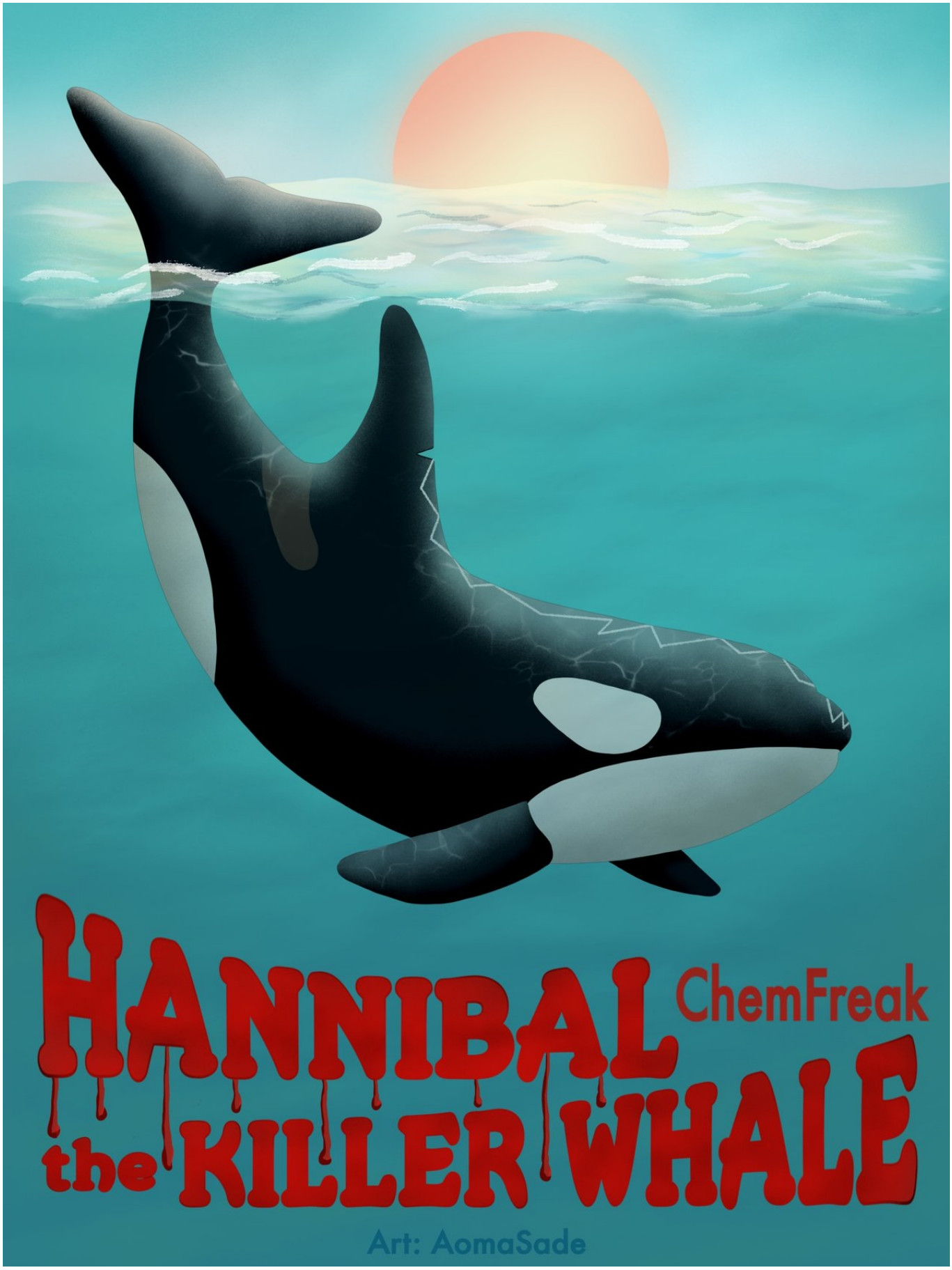
This story is loosely based on the film "Blackfish" that I watched month ago and thought "But what if real murder orca?"

My thanks go to my beta queuest for the marvelous support and the hunting down of my translation errors :)
Updates will be bi-weekly.

Please have a look at the awesome cover art Aoma Sade made for me!!! Ist is the most beautiful thing I ever saw and the first time someone made art inspired by my work and I am in love! <3

- Translation into Español available: Hannibal, la orca asesina | Hannibal the killer whale by xitimalauper
- A translation of Hannibal der Killerwal by ChemFreak

The Biologist


HANNIBAL
the KILLER WHALE
ChemFreak
Art: AomaSade

Visibility was deteriorating by the minute. The sun had just set, and the rapidly approaching darkness made it almost impossible to find your way safely. The lone diver was gliding through the seemingly endless depths, bubbles rising up behind him. Only a few meters ahead, the thin beam of his flashlight was lost in the void.

"Damn it, Graham! Come back up! We are not going to find him today.", came a tense voice from Will's headphones. "You can keep looking tomorrow if it's that important to you."

The beam of light continued to swing back and forth like a pendulum. Nothing but darkness. Then something silver flashed brightly. Thin, just a thread floating through the darkness like an ominous harbinger. If Will hadn't had his respirator in his mouth, he would have cursed out loud. He approached cautiously.

Unfortunately, ghost nets were a sad part of their job. Far too often they had fitted turtles, sharks and dolphins with tracking devices to follow their migration routes, only to find the animal lifeless in one of those wandering death traps, days or weeks later, often along with dozens of other dead animals, fish, rays, all sorts of marine life. They all died needlessly because some idiots simply threw their old nets overboard instead of properly disposing of them on land.

More threads appeared in the light of his lamp, tangled and knotted with algae and seaweed but no less deadly. It was impossible for a single diver to recover a ghost net. Not only was there a risk of tangling yourself, but with so many bodies, the nets were far too heavy to simply haul to the surface. Many also had lead weights that were meant to keep them vertical in the water to catch as many fish as possible. And they continued to do so.

The first victim Will encountered was a large seagull. The bird was already partially eaten by crustaceans and smaller fish, the head almost skeletonized, the abdomen torn open and the internal organs eaten away. Just an empty shell with silvery white feathers. Will struggled to breathe deeply and evenly, stifling the images surging in his mind. The hungry seagull that dives into the water because it thinks it sees easy prey. Small fish caught in the mesh of the net, wriggling... Not now! He forced himself back to the present and kept swimming. Shortly thereafter, Will saw the first fish, also dead, dead, dead in the fine mesh with empty, staring eyes. He navigated through the billowing folds with a gentle flip of his fins, always anxious to push the net away from him.

"I swear to you, Will, if you drown down there because of your own stupidity, I'll never speak to you again!" Beverly sounded genuinely concerned. Will glanced at his oxygen gauge. He still had air for half an hour. If he didn't find the young reef shark they tagged yesterday soon, he would indeed have to give up. He looked up towards the surface of the sea, but no more daylight came down. He was in total darkness in the middle of a death trap. The light from his lamp swept over the mesh and cord. Seaweed, plastic bags, jellyfish, small fish. Then a slight movement.

A dark tip of a tail lashed back and forth, but it only pushed the shark deeper into the mesh. Its gills flapped frantically, trying to get enough oxygen out of the water. Will grabbed his dive knife and got to work.

The juvenile blacktip reef shark was already too exhausted to be a threat, so he was free to focus on the net. And that was necessary. The cords lay tightly around the animal's body, already slightly cutting into the skin in some places, and Will had to be careful not to further injure the shark. Luckily, it hadn't been trapped in the net for long, otherwise it would have wrapped itself up tighter and tighter in its panic until at some point it would have been impossible to free the shark in time. Will was breathing heavily, keeping in mind his ever-dwindling supply of oxygen. He had to unravel each stitch individually, the thin nylon stubbornly resisted. His dive computer beeped a warning.

"Will, where are you? Get up, you're running out of air!" Beverly was audibly trying not to panic. Panic is never a good thing, either in diving or over water. Will took another deep breath and continued cutting the strings. He almost made it! Then finally the last piece of net gave way and the shark was free. Will gently turned the animal in the right direction, away from the deadly web, and prayed there weren't any more around. A large, dark eye glanced this way and that, seeming to fixate briefly on Will. A little lethargic at first, the shark began to move, but with every flap of its tail, with every breath of its gills, it became livelier. After a few moments it disappeared into the dark depths of the ocean.

Will looked after it for a moment, relieved that he had found it in time. Then he began his ascent towards the surface. Beverly would certainly lecture him on safety and risk assessment…

A tug on his right fin held him back. Will closed his eyes briefly, took a deep breath, and then looked down. The beam of light from his lamp darted down his legs to his feet and he began cursing inwardly. Part of the net had gotten caught in the fin's buckle.

His dive computer beeped. 10 more minutes of air.

No need for haste. Haste leads to mistakes, mistakes lead to wasted time, which leads to even more rush and finally panic. And once you panic, you're as good as dead. Slowly and intently, Will leaned forward, careful not to come into contact with any more scraps of the fishing net. He tugged at the nylon threads that were hooked into the buckle of his fin.

"This is the last time I'll let you talk me into letting you dive alone. Will Graham, I'll be down there in five minutes and I'll pull you up myself!" But then there wouldn't be anyone on the boat. And if the current carried them far enough, they didn't stand a chance. Not at night, not in this swell, not with this gear. He was running out of time.

Think, Will Graham! he admonished himself. Don't panic. What is the problem, what is the simplest solution? You're stuck in a net and you're running out of air. You won't get any more air, so take care of the net. Your fin got tangled, what can you do? Cutting you free takes too long, untangling the fin didn't work-

He wasn't far from the surface, he was sure of that. It was hard to tell the distance in the dark, but it couldn't be far. It must not be. Rather than continue trying to free his fin from the net, he undid the buckle that held it to his foot. With only one fin left, the ascent was tedious and unbalanced, and several times he had to flee, rowing frantically with his hands, from another mesh fold that appeared in front of him out of the darkness. Eventually his head broke through the waves. Hastily he groped for the emergency light on his shoulder. After the endless darkness he blinded himself at first, but that didn't matter to him at the moment.

"Thank heavens, there you are!" He heard Beverly through his headphones. "Then I can put my emergency equipment away again. Seriously, Graham, you gave me at least three gray hairs. You owe me a beer. And a pizza!" Over the roar of the wind and waves, Will heard the chugging engine of their small research vessel approaching. A few minutes later he laboriously heaved himself up the ladder on board.

Beverly stood at the rail, a towel slung over her shoulder, and eyed him critically. Will began to peel out of his wetsuit, his hands shaking.

"Did you find our missing son?" she asked casually as he piled his gear piece by piece onto the small box where it would be stowed after he cleaned it and inspected it for damage.

"He was caught in a ghost net. That's why it took me so long." Will answered without thinking. He realized his mistake as soon as the words left his mouth.

"A ghost net? You absolute nutcase! Really, sometimes you've got less brains than a box of jellyfish!" Beverly clasped her hands at her sides indignantly. "I really don't know why I'm surprised. That was typical of you again! Putting your life in danger for a shark." She shook her head disapprovingly.

"I couldn't just leave it hanging there!" Will tried to justify himself, which wasn't made any easier by the fact that he was facing his colleague in only his underwear. Despite her justifiable anger, Beverly handed him the towel. Will hastily began to rub himself down. Now that he was out of the water and not moving, he was starting to shiver.

Beverly placed a hand on his freezing shoulder. "Killing yourself trying to save a shark is not a solution to our problem. And we already have too few people anyway. Must be because of the lousy pay."

Despite his chattering teeth, Will had to grin. "Didn't you take out life insurance on me? You could have hired some fit young assistants with that money and finally gotten rid of your despicable duo." Beverly's graduate students, Brian Zeller and Jimmy Price, didn't get on well with Will, which was entirely mutual.

"Nice idea, but any insurance company even looking superficially at your career and medical history will blow me right off," Beverly said. She was probably right about that.

Halfway dried, Will hurried to slip into his carefully folded clothes that lay ready for him on the bench beside the cabin. "At least that was our last tracker. And with any luck, we'll have enough data for your next paper in a few weeks," he said, pulling dry socks over his icy toes. One of the best feelings in the world, in his opinion.

Beverly's research into migratory routes off the local coast had suffered some severe setbacks as they kept losing animals. Fished illegally, died in ghost nets, choked on plastic waste and washed up somewhere.

While Will sorted and packed away his gear, Beverly started the engine and they headed back to the small fishing port where they had set up their base camp. Zeller and Price were already waiting for her at the dock, shivering slightly in the evening cold and the dampness of the docks.

"You took your time!" said Zeller, grabbing the rope that Will threw at him. He began mooring the boat as soon as they docked. Apparently the graduate student was in a hurry to get back to the small room they had rented.

Beverly sauntered over, her laptop bag slung over her shoulder and a huge grin on her face. "Will had to save a shark."

"Sure thing." Price gave Will a quick look. "Was the rescue at least successful?"

Will just nodded and heaved the equipment box onto the dock. After a long day in and out of the ocean he only wanted a warm meal and then his bed. Even if it was just a small camp bed in a guest room above the local pub that was far too small for four people. He had slept in worse conditions on various research trips.

After a meager dinner of thin potato soup and stale bread from the day before, they climbed the narrow staircase to their room and soon Zeller's piercing snoring filled the small room, audible even through Will's earplugs.

Despite the bone-deep exhaustion that filled him, Will couldn't fall asleep right away. He looked out the small window at the starry sky. Here on the coast, where there weren't as many man-made lights, the stars twinkled all the brighter. He had spent a summer on a fishing boat navigating the South Pacific while attending college. Eventually all land masses had disappeared below the horizon and the sheer immensity of the sea had almost swallowed Will. That had been the moment when he had decided to devote his life to the sea and everything that lived in it. Looking at the night sky, filled with stars, planets, the Milky Way. Endless expanses, as mysterious and unexplored as the depths beneath him, separated only by a little metal, held together by rivets and human ingenuity.

With the sound of the ocean and the inexplicable whisper of the stars in his mind, Will finally drifted away.

The next morning was cold and gray. The four of them sat around one of the shabby tables in the pub and drank tea. Price texted with the new Russian colleague he had met two weeks ago in a microbiology seminar, Zeller leafed through a local newspaper that consisted of only four pages. Beverly had laboriously set up a hotspot with her cell phone and was checking her emails. They had all the data they needed. The plan was to leave after breakfast and with any luck they would be back home by mid-afternoon.

A gentle nudge in the side startled Will out of his thoughts. He blinked sleepily at Beverly over the top of his glasses.

"What?" he mumbled, still half asleep.

"A job came in for you." Beverly turned the screen of her laptop towards him, but the resolution was so grainy that he could hardly see anything.

"Not PETA again?" The last encounter with the radical animal protection activists had been enough for him. Some of their methods were just as bad and condemnable as the animal abuse they so vociferously protested against. Sure, there were sensible people out there who would do anything to nurse animals back to health and preserve their natural habitat, but somehow Will

had always had the misfortune of running into the small but vocal faction of total radicals who would rather euthanize a house rabbit than keep it in a good home.

Beverly snapped him out of his gloomy thoughts. "No, a Doctor Alana Bloom. Apparently she was referred to you by Jack.” Jack Crawford served as chair of her research department's faculty council and approved most of her research grants.

"From Jack? What is it about?” asked Zeller and put down his newspaper. He leaned towards them, trying to get a look at the screen.

"An orca in an aquarium in Baltimore." Beverly had turned the laptop back to face herself after Will had made no move to read the mail himself.

Price, who specialized in marine veterinary medicine, looked up from his cell phone. "Is he ill?"

"No idea. It says here it's a general assessment…” Beverly squinted at the mail.

Will rolled his eyes and wrapped his hands around his teacup, which was only lukewarm. "Am I a psychiatrist?" he grumbled to himself. "Orcas in aquariums are seldom happy, often ill, and in the vast majority of cases, the owners don't give a damn that they're vegetating to a greater or lesser degree in agony."

"They pay good money. Go there, tell it to their faces, collect the cash and we're covered for next season,” Beverly said, grinning at him encouragingly. "Maybe we can go to Alaska and see some orcas in the wild. To make up for the poor guy you're supposed to be evaluating."

Will's specialty was the behavioral research of marine mammals, so he kept receiving inquiries from aquariums. He frowned. "The National Aquarium in Baltimore has no capacity for orcas. They can hardly keep their bottlenose dolphins sane, let alone a killer whale.”

“It seems more like a kind of amusement park. Vergers WaterWorld, if that means anything to you?” Beverly answered him casually. Then, puzzled, she raised her eyebrows, blinked, and leaned closer to the screen. "And apparently this orca may have possibly killed several people or had a hand in their deaths? Allegedly, this information is, as always, without guarantee..."

Will nearly spat his tea across the table. "Orcas don't kill people."

Beverly just looked at him helplessly and shrugged. "I agree with you, Will. But once is always the first time? Doctor Bloom writes that they were probably accidents but would like an objective opinion from a specialist.”

Will nodded thoughtfully and sat back. The old wooden chair he was sitting on creaked alarmingly. "It's not like I have anything better planned for the next few weeks. And a little extra cash in our coffers really doesn't hurt.” Diving equipment wasn't cheap and it wasn't a good idea to skimp on the stuff that saved you from a horrible death by asphyxiation. Also, Will loved working with dolphins and whales. They were fantastic, loving, vivacious beings without a spark of malice in them.

What was the chance that this one would be different?

The Killer Whale

Chapter Notes

My thanks go to my beta queuest for the marvelous support and the reasurrance that it is totaly fine to drown a few people in the name of entertainment :)

Unlike the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Verger's WaterWorld was a fair distance from shore. Also, it was clearly more of an amusement park than an aquarium. Flashing neon lights and loud music gave Will a throbbing headache before he even entered the park. The people at the entrance had waved him through without much questioning, apparently informed in advance about his arrival.

A woman with long, dark brown hair was already waiting for him. She held a clipboard in her hand, and she had the pen that went with it tucked behind her ear. She smiled at him with an honest enthusiasm that Will rarely found tolerable at this early hour.

"Professor Graham? Very pleased, I'm Doctor Bloom.” She held out a hand, which he reflexively shook.

He nodded stiffly and searched for an appropriate answer. “Will is sufficient. Only my students call me Professor.” And Jack when he paraded him around like a circus horse at conferences.

"Nice to meet you, Will. Then please call me Alana.”

She led him through a maze of paths, behind the scenes of the park. Everything seemed very clean and new, white painted metal and ceramic tiles on the walls. Easy to clean and perhaps because of that, worryingly clinical. Will hated hospitals.

Then they entered the area where the animals were kept. Glass and water, the light filtered greenish through the large tanks. Alana motioned this way and that, her explanations washing over Will like waves on a beach over a sandcastle. Only when they stopped in front of a meter-high glass wall did he manage to concentrate on her words.

“We are very pleased that your schedule worked out on such short notice. Hannibal hasn't been with us that long and these strange incidents don't exactly make for a relaxed working atmosphere. If you know what I mean?” The water behind the glass wall was turquoise blue. Will knew all too well the tanks where whales and dolphins were kept in captivity. Smooth walls and floors, no plants, no other animals, no distractions. Easy to clean. Pragmatic.

"Hannibal is your orca?" Far back in the tank, Will saw movement. Black and white, graceful. And, while difficult to judge at that range, quite large, even for a killer whale.

"Yes, Mister Verger bought him from a European zoo six months ago.” Alana led him to a set of stairs that climbed the wall of the pool. They reached an intermediate floor that was

apparently designed as an observation station and continued to climb. Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw the orca swimming along the bottom of the tank, a dark shadow against the deep blue. At the top of the stairs, a door led out into the artificial lake landscape of several large pools, which could be separated from each other by sliding gates. Behind it rose stands that made Will think of a football stadium. Colorful seats, big screens, spotlights and speakers.

A man in a dark suit stood near the edge of the pool, hands casually in the pockets of a jacket, talking to a young woman in a typical animal trainer outfit. She seemed grateful for their arrival, and took the opportunity to slip away with a nod and a hasty wave in Alana's direction.

"Hello Mason. This is Professor Graham.” Alana began. "He's here for-" The suit cut her off, a huge grin on his face. However, behind the rimless lenses, his eyes were cold and calculating. A typical businessman, such as Will often encountered in large amusement parks. It took a special kind of person to confine highly intelligent life-forms in tiny tanks for life in order to increase one's profits.

“Oh yes, because of those unfortunate incidents. Very pleased, Professor, very pleased indeed. I hope you can give our big guy a clean bill of health so I can sleep at night again."

"OSHA asking questions?" Will guessed dryly. When people died, it was usually a question of who was to blame and who ultimately had to pay.

“OSHA, the union, company safety, various animal rights activists and, last but not least, our insurance. Payments have skyrocketed.” Mister Verger shook his head sadly.

Behind him, the orca's dorsal fin broke the surface of the water. The whale came to the surface only briefly, blew out a puff of air and dove again at high speed. Surprisingly active for an orca in captivity, his demeanor reminded Will of hunting orcas in the arctic who come to the surface briefly to look for seals on ice floats.

"A handsome fellow, isn't he? And a veritable gold mine! Fresh genes in the breeding pool are always welcome.” The park owner gave a dirty grin and waggled his eyebrows. Will didn't know what to say to that and instead watched the orca.

He swam in a big circle, from one pool to the next. Apparently the gates were open by default as long as no performances were taking place. Again the orca surfaced, dorsal fin erect and straight as a blade.

"You only have Hannibal here? No more orcas?” he asked casually, eyes fixed on the tank.

"One is expensive enough!" laughed Mister Verger. “I can only hope that he makes more money than he costs. Just the amount of fish he eats is costing me a fortune. Not to mention that facility.” He slapped Will heartily on the shoulder, so hard that he stumbled that one step forward. "I'll leave you to your work then, Professor. Alana here knows how to reach me.”

Will breathed a sigh of relief when the park's owner walked away. He then glanced sideways at Alana, who smiled apologetically at him. "He means well...I guess." She didn't seem to believe it herself.

They were silent for a moment. Then Alana grabbed his arm and pulled him to a platform that extended over the edge of the pool. At the edge was a metal bucket full of ice cubes and small, silvery fish.

"Come, meet Hannibal." She pulled out a small whistle that hung on a lanyard around her neck. "He's usually in a good mood this early in the day and is happy to have visitors." At her short, sharp whistle, the orca came over to them, at a rather leisurely pace. Will was reminded of Beverly's cat, who always made sure you knew what an honor it was to be graced with her presence.

"He looks very good. How long has he been with you?" He was sure that this information had been in the files somewhere.

Alana didn't seem bothered by the question. "Half a year."

Will critically examined the whale and its unusually straight dorsal fin. "And he was born and raised in captivity?"

"Yes, in a Russian zoo. The paperwork was a nightmare!" Alana replied absently, her concentration on the orca, which had now arrived at the platform and lifted its head out of the water with a high-pitched snarl.

"Hello Hannibal. Look, you have a visitor! This is Professor Graham. Say hello!" Alana made a hand gesture and Hannibal gave a piercing whistle. "Wonderful. Do you want a fish?" She grabbed the bucket and rattled it, but instead of opening its mouth, the whale sank deeper into the water and jerked its head from side to side. Splash water and Alana put the bucket away again.

"He's not eating?" This could be a symptom of anything. Toothache, an upset stomach... Orcas in captivity were mostly hungry and eating was one of the few respites in their monotonous lives. The whale refusing food was definitely an alarm signal, Will just didn't know what for yet.

Alana shrugged helplessly. "He's a very picky eater. This worries us, but we just need to experiment a little. Who knows what they fed him over there." She frowned in concern.

Will tried to lighten the mood a bit. "Vodka and borscht. Can I have a look at his teeth?" Perhaps there was a very simple explanation for the whale's refusal.

"Naturally. Hannibal, come here. Say aaahhh…" Another whistle and a sweeping white hand signal later, Will faced an impressive set of teeth. The teeth were spotless and white with almost no signs of wear. Either the Russians had a really good dentist, or this whale had been very well kept busy for most of its life. Orcas in captivity tended to chew on concrete edges and the metal bars of their tanks out of boredom, completely ruining their teeth in the process.

"Everything is in excellent condition. Really extraordinary." Will mumbled and crouched down. The orca closed its mouth without waiting for Alana's signal and seemed to be appraising Will just as critically. Then he pushed himself up out of the water a little, towards Will. He carefully placed a hand on the whale's snout, rubbing his fingers over the rubbery skin.

Under his fingertips he felt fine grooves and on closer inspection he recognized thin scars that zigzagged across his head and back.

"We strive to provide the best possible care for our animals," Alana said proudly. "Hannibal is the only orca I know personally that has an erect dorsal fin."

Will nodded, eyes still on the orca. "I noticed that as well. Do you feed extra collagen?"

With a glowing enthusiasm only a medic could muster, Alana rattled off a list of additives, supplements, and other substances that the park routinely stuffed into the fish they fed Hannibal. Or tried to feed. Will nodded politely, his hand still on the orca's nose, which seemed to be watching him patiently.

With a tinny clank, a door opened behind him and a young woman came plodding out of the nursing area, two buckets in her hands.

Alana waved her over to them. "This is Abigail, our intern. Hey Abby, is that Hannibal's food?" With a final pat, Will rose from his crouched position, groaning softly, and turned to face the newcomer.

The girl nodded and grinned widely. Her enthusiasm took Will back to his college days, when he was doing internships at various aquariums over the summer holidays. Being allowed to feed the animals was a special privilege and he had always enjoyed it very much.

“Yes, today we are going to try herring. After the sardines didn't go down so well...” Abigail looked hopefully to the edge of the pool, but the orca had disappeared back into the depths and seemed to prefer to do his rounds rather than deal with the people at the edge of his pool.

Will frowned. "What have you had the best successes with so far?" It wasn't the teeth, so it was an organ problem after all? This was nearly impossible to diagnose in whales and dolphins, even with a handheld ultrasound machine. Or was there someone secretly feeding the whale? If yes, why? And with what?

"Atlantic salmon and eel," Alana listed. "Of course, that's expensive in the long run, especially when you consider the amounts we feed here every day."

"How is the training going? What if Hannibal doesn't like the fish you offer as a reward?" Orcas and dolphins were mostly only fed in show mode or during training to guarantee their cooperation. Hannibal's denial had to put a lot of stress on the coaches.

"Oh, he was going along nicely for a while. But he has his exercises that he doesn't like doing and sometimes he just ignores our signals.” Abigails looked over to the edge of the pool with a half smile and shrugged. “Sometimes it's the very simple exercises. I think he doesn't like coming into the flat area. And he doesn't like to be touched. Of course, that makes the medical examinations particularly exciting.”

And it also hampered Hannibal's contributions to the orca population's gene pool. Unless Mister Verger planned to buy another whale or borrow it from another park, artificial insemination was the only option. And for that, it was necessary for Hannibal to let the trainers

touch him. Over a longer period of time, in the most intimate places. Will was getting a clearer picture of the situation.

The deaths weren't Mason's big problem, maybe they were just an excuse. Since the introduction of the ban that prohibited the capture of wild orcas in American and most European waters, amusement parks had increasingly been dependent on their own breeding. And the genetic pool got increasingly shallow after a while. Buying an orca from eastern Europe was an investment. However, Mason had certainly paid heavily in advance, it couldn't be cheap to have an orca flown to America. And now he finally wanted to reap the rewards he felt he was entitled to while the law still allowed it. California had already banned the breeding of orcas in captivity, but other states could follow suit at any time if public pressure was strong enough.

Will sighed. Unfortunately, this part of his job dealing with the exploitation of marine animals was not new to him. But he got good money for his assessment and maybe he could help improve Hannibal's living situation a little. He turned to Alana.

“Surely you have recordings and reports on the incidents? I think that's a good starting point. From what I can see here, Hannibal is a healthy if somewhat picky orca with no immediately apparent health issues. He is extraordinarily active so doesn't seem to be in any pain. So let's look at the other side, that of the people involved."

Alana seemed very pleased with his assessment of her protégé, Will remembered too late that as the vet in charge, she might feel offended by his presence. But she just smiled at him, her good humor seeming to be a constant part of her character.

"Of course. Come on, let's go to my office. There is no footage of the first incident because the cameras are turned off at night, but we got the medical examiner's report.” They said goodbye to Abigail, who walked to the edge of the pool with her buckets and apparently wanted to try to get Hannibal interested in her herrings after all. Then Will followed Alana down the stairs and down a long corridor to her office.

The room was small and windowless, but lit by powerful daylight lamps. Posters of whales and dolphins hung on the walls, as well as some medical cross-sections of various marine mammals.

Alana booted up her computer and let Will have her office chair. “In this folder are all the video files and the incident reports. I'm just doing my morning lap and then I'll be back."

"Thanks, then I'll deal with this murder case." Alana's smile suddenly seemed a bit forced and Will remembered that many people didn't understand his morbid sense of humor. He missed Beverly, who had casually told him right away when they first met that she had almost studied forensic medicine because she was interested in how things looked from the inside.

With a small smile he turned to the files. Really, how bad could it be?

The Past

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a week early because I will be on vacation for the next two weeks and did not want the chapter to be late :) Better be early.

Thank all of you lovely people who left me kudos and comments, I enjoy your feedback very much.
And of course many thanks to my beta queuest for the marvelous support and the enthusiasm for obscure marine life facts.

Will leaned back in the squeaky office chair, completely perplexed. This was… worse than he had expected.

It all started when a visitor apparently managed to hide on the grounds and wandered through the park after closing time. Nobody had seen him, not the trainers, not the cleaning staff, not the security guards. He appeared on some security cameras, but only briefly. On the few shots he seemed very determined, he knew where he wanted to go. His trail ended at the orca pool, where a neatly folded pile of his clothes and his body were found floating in the water the next morning.

Officially the cause of death was drowning, water had been found in his lungs. Therefore, the park's statement was that he jumped into the orca's pool, stark naked, and then passed out from hypothermia and eventually drowned. It all sounded very clear and clean until you read the autopsy report and got to the long, long list of horrible injuries. Bite marks on arms and legs. Broken ribs, bruises everywhere. The abdomen was torn open, internal organs were missing. Since there was only one animal in the tank, there was no doubt that Hannibal had eaten parts of the man. The only question was whether he had played an active role in his death or whether he had later acted out of hunger and boredom and mutilated the corpse.

Had the trainers, who regularly got into the water with the orca, been fully informed about this incident? Will doubted it. Had they known, maybe the second incident might have been less severe?

Just weeks after the first incident, if you wanted to call someone's death that, a trainer was so badly injured during a show that he died on the way to the hospital. The park's official statement said the trainer was unfortunate to get caught under a jump from the orca. The whale had landed on him, breaking his pelvis and several ribs. One of the ribs had pierced his lung. It was clearly the fault of the trainer who shouldn't have been there.

Things appeared a little different in the various videos of this incident. The trainer was in the water and the orca was supposed to swim under him, pick him up and then take him for a lap around the large pool. Instead, the orca had jumped and crushed him with all its weight.

Hannibal had incredible speed and no matter how well the trainer could swim, even if he had been warned, he would not have had a chance to get to safety in time. Had Hannibal misread the signal? Did he think he should jump over the trainer? Such a risky trick couldn't really be part of the normal repertoire. It would be an easy trick for a dolphin, Will had seen it in shows many times before. But an orca of several tons?

Little by little, Will read through all the documents that Alana had collected for him. It was clear to him that this might only represent a small part of the big picture. Police reports, training reports, the autopsy report... All of this left many questions unanswered.

Were they really accidents or deliberate acts of sabotage? A visitor who sneaks unseen across the park and later tragically drowns. Without help, without external influences? A whale that won't eat, that refuses to train, that makes a crucial mistake in a show. Just a coincidence?

Cui bono? Who benefited from this situation? That was often a good starting point. One of the trainers, perhaps, experimenting with an unauthorized training program? Someone working for a rival trying to discredit Vergers WaterWorld? Or was it really an unfortunate series of coincidences? Accidents that were no one's fault? It was too early to commit to a theory. But he had enough information to do some initial research.

Will found a small printer under the table. Surely Alana didn't mind if he took some of the documents home with him. Will found the papers on Hannibal's purchase and transfer particularly interesting, which could also be due to the fact that he didn't understand a word. All the documents were in Cyrillic and apparently there was no translation. Mister Verger probably spoke Russian fluently and therefore considered it unnecessary to file such documents twice. Completely normal, no reason for fussy inquiries. He briefly tried running the documents through a translation program, but the results were so muddled they might as well still have been in Russian. Maybe he would have better luck at home.

He heard footsteps in the hallway and hurried to stuff the printed pages into his shoulder bag. When Alana re-entered her office, Will was sitting in front of the screen, lost in thought, a video of one of the orca shows playing on a continuous loop.

"Well, how's it going?" the vet asked. Will stopped the video and looked over at her.

“Obviously the injuries are worrying, but I think it's too early to say for sure. I'd like to watch some shows, maybe some training sessions, to see how Hannibal interacts with his trainers.” Most importantly, he wanted to see how the trainers interacted with each other. Rivalries, jealousies, rank fights and the like occurred in most work environments. And sometimes they had deadly consequences.

"Of course. Here, I'll write you down a few showtimes. In the meantime, feel free to look around the park. I've got a temporary employee badge made so you can get through security and security doors at the employee areas.” She handed Will a plastic card on a ribbon. “A routine check-up is scheduled for this afternoon, so you can get to know my colleagues right away. There are two other vets working at this park and all three of us are here for Hannibal.” She giggled. "He's our main attraction, after all."

With a few hours of free time before the next show, Will decided to take a look around the park. He strolled along the wide paths, everything looked clean and friendly. Blue mosaics on the

walls and along the low walls delimiting the flower beds, lush flowering bushes and borders. Although it was still quite early in the day, visitors were already running through the park, children laughing enthusiastically and dragging their parents behind them, couples strolling hand in hand past the tropical aquariums.

There was a large artificial coral reef with a tunnel going through it. Will stood under one of the arches for a long time, watching a blacktip reef shark circling tirelessly.

He thought of the young shark he had freed from the ghost net a few days ago. Was he alive? Had he processed the near-death experience well? Was there enough food for him, or did he have to starve because the overfishing of his area was so far advanced that there was not enough food left? This shark here in the aquarium didn't have such problems. No nets, no competition, feed exactly tailored to his needs, in the right amount, always at the same time. Probably a much better average life expectancy. If given a choice, what would the shark choose?

There were sharks that couldn't be kept in aquariums. Some species died within a few days or weeks. They simply did not eat or died during transport. It was the same with humans, some doing well within the narrow rules and confines of society, some not. Will himself would probably go insane if he were cooped up indefinitely and forced to conform to social norms. He pulled himself together for the few conferences Jack dragged him to each year, and after that it took him a few weeks at sea, or at least on shore, to regain his composure.

A melodious gong snapped him out of his thoughts.

-Dear guests! Our sea lion show starts in a few minutes! Take advantage of this unique opportunity, admire…

Will took the already slightly crumpled note from his pocket and compared it with the show schedule of the advertising brochure he had picked up at one of the many information stands. After the sea lion show there was a short break, then the general feedings began, which could be attended. The orca show took place afterwards, probably to attract as many spectators as possible. Early enough to allow morning visitors to stay a little longer, but also late enough to be seen by the crowds that didn't pour into the park until the afternoon.

He strolled through the aquarium in the direction of the viewing area and stopped briefly at the high window through which visitors could look into the largest of the four orca tanks.

Objectively speaking, and compared to the open ocean, there was very little space for a whale here, but Will knew this was one of the better orca tanks. The different areas offered different depths of water and there was a slight current that made a circle and probably served to channel dirt and debris to the filter systems. Hannibal was still doing his rounds, surfacing occasionally to take a breath, then diving down again. Again and again to the bottom of the pool, a bit up to get through the sluice gate into the next pool, back to the bottom. Rather unusual for a single orca, whose only social contact was his trainers on the water surface.

As Will climbed the stairs along the glass wall, the orca just passed him. For a moment they were level and Will once again marveled at the animal's sheer size and grace. Its dorsal fin was almost as high as Will himself, and as the whale swam past, Will, out of habit, took note of the little idiosyncrasies and features that would allow him to recognize an orca if he were whale

watching in the wild. The shape of the white patches behind the eyes and the light patches behind its dorsal fin, and the scars on its back. Hannibal also had a notch about halfway up his dorsal fin. Will smiled happily after the whale as it disappeared into the turquoise water, steadily circling, wishing he'd met the whale on one of his explorations in the sea and not in this amusement park in a concrete pool. Lost in idle thought, he finally reached the top of the stairs and left the observation area.

He stopped at the chest-high railing that separated the spectators from the water. Arms crossed, he leaned on it and looked out over the water rippling gently. No comparison to the real swell of the ocean. With a quiet, almost silent blow of breath, Hannibal came to the surface. Will smiled thoughtfully.

"You're pretty quiet for a show orca," he mumbled, lost in thought. "You guys are usually the loud type." Noise meant attention, attention meant distraction and food. Will rested his chin on a fist.

"I once met a group of orcas who could whistle so loud they stunned the fish they were hunting. It's impressive what you can do. And how different you are from each other. You are probably from a northern lineage. Maybe that's why you're so quiet.” Whales that preyed on other marine mammals tended to be quiet compared to their fish-eating counterparts, as seals were very good at recognizing an orca's call and fleeing accordingly.

To Will's surprise, Hannibal seemed interested in what he was saying, because the orca stopped his usual lap and came over to him. The security perimeter prevented Will from touching the orca, but their eyes met. Once again, the marine biologist was equal parts intrigued and disturbed by the intelligence that beheld him.

"You don't belong here," he whispered to the orca. "It's a shame and if I could smuggle you out of here I would do it in a heartbeat." He sighed and attempted an encouraging smile. "If I can't free you, at least I'll do my best to find out what's going on here. Something stinks. And who knows, maybe I can make your stay here a little bit more bearable.”

Apparently not particularly convinced of his promise, the whale turned away and resumed its rounds. Will couldn't blame him.

"As long as there are no more mysterious incidents, Mister Verger can get the prosecutor's office and his insurance company off his back,” Will said, shaking his head, as the orca pulled away. Hannibal dove in an elegant arc, the smack of his tail spattering Will with fine drops of water. Against his will he had to laugh.

The bleachers were still empty, so he could take his time picking a good seat, close enough to the platform where the coaches would be standing to see their interactions. There was already a lot of work behind the scenes, the intern who had brought Hannibal food this morning was preparing various toys and props. Balls and heavy, colorful rings to fetch, some long poles that Hannibal would probably jump over. She waved at Will when she saw him in the stands, and Will waved back, slightly embarrassed.

Luckily she was too busy to come over and chat with him. Unfortunately at some point he also had to ask the staff about Hannibal and his behavior. Maybe this afternoon, at the medical check-up. some of the keepers and trainers would certainly be there too.

He passed the time watching Hannibal and taking some photos with his cell phone. Gradually, the individual gates that connected the pools were closed. The orca now only did his rounds in the large show tank. He probably knew what was coming, after all, these shows were part of his daily routine.

The seats around him were slowly filling up, apparently the feedings were over. He glanced at his watch. In fact, he had been sitting here for almost an hour! How time flies when you don't have to talk to other people idly. He winced as upbeat pop music blared from the speakers and the screens came alive. The park's logo flickered big over the crowd, aerial views of the facilities, colorful fish and, of course, an orca making an impressive leap out of the water. It wasn't Hannibal, as Will recognized immediately, but a female with a much smaller dorsal fin. This clip was probably used for all parks.

The trainers marched onto the stage to enthusiastic clapping and cheering from the crowd. They were all wearing black neoprene suits with brightly colored stripes. At the end of the line, Will recognized Abigail, who was clearly trying to appear professional and not show her childish enthusiasm too much.

"Welcome, dear children, dear guests!" The first trainer in line had stepped forward and spoke into a discreet headset that transmitted her voice to the loudspeakers. She had light blonde hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and exuded a calm authority. She didn't seem like someone who missed much, and Will doubted she would condone defiance or unauthorized experimentation with her charges.

“I'm Bedelia and I'm going to accompany you through our orca show today. First of all, a big round of applause for our star: Hannibal the Orca!” The music swelled and amidst enthusiastic screeches and thunderous applause, the whale leapt out of the water in an elegant arc. For a moment it seemed to be floating in mid-air, until it plunged back into the water with a mighty splash, splashing the front rows of seats with water.

“Hannibal is a male orca. He is nine meters long and weighs almost eight tons. He is 12 years old and has been living with us at Vergers WaterWorld, Baltimore for a year. Orcas are very special whales, they are highly intelligent and very playful. They belong to the dolphin family…” Will tuned out the biological explanations and instead watched the trainers spread out around the pool. Everyone seemed relaxed and happy, but also focused. Surely the unfortunate death of their colleague had left its mark on them, but no one seemed afraid or openly suspicious of the others.

A series of tricks followed, most of them classic, from a repertoire Will knew only too well. Hannibal played a little ball with his coaches, dove after weighted rings thrown into the water, splashed the spectators and made some impressive jumps, which always caused a storm of enthusiasm from the audience.

Will took some more photos, not only of Hannibal but also of the trainers, the pool and the props. Everything seemed well organized, clean and professional, but he knew from experience that appearances could be deceiving.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, dear children, a first for our dear Abigail! Abby will be swimming with Hannibal for the first time today! An incomparable experience…” Will's hands were suddenly clammy. Abigail stood on the platform, grinning widely and waving, looking

like every girl's dream come true. About to swim with a real orca. She raised the silver whistle that hung on a lanyard around her neck to her lips and gave a short whistle calling the orca over.

All sounds suddenly seemed distant and muffled. Will watched the scene as if he were in a dream, a nightmare in which he could not move, condemned to follow what was happening without being able to intervene. Abigail crouched at the edge of the pool when Hannibal appeared in front of her. She smiled, said something Will couldn't hear because of the distance. Then she rose again and made a sweeping gesture. The orca began to swim along the edge of the pool, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. Abigail ran, keeping up with him. When the orca dived, she made an elegant jump into the water.

The turbulent surface of the water only gave a vague idea of what was going on. Abigail dove in a shallow arc toward the center of the pool, the orca had made a larger loop and was now behind her. Now, in direct size comparison, the massive form of the whale really came into its own. Nine meters long, eight tons heavy, and in its natural element far superior to a human in terms of speed and agility.

All of this went through Will's mind in just a few seconds. Then the orca pushed under the dainty trainer and lifted her to the surface of the water. Abigail threw up her arms, kneeling in front of the whale's dorsal fin, which towered quite a bit over her. The crowd cheered.

Hannibal made a lap around the pool, even and steady like a small motorboat. As he headed for the second lap, Abigail stood up cautiously and now appeared to be surfing the whale. Will held his breath and only when she jumped back onto the platform with a big step off the whale's back did he dare to breathe again. In hindsight, he didn't know exactly why he was so nervous. Surely the coach's tragic death had been an accident and, moreover, several weeks ago! This show took place daily. Why should anything go wrong today?

Apparently the show was coming to an end. The blonde trainer, Bedelia, congratulated Abigail on her first successful performance and announced one last trick.

"And now, in closing, we all want to say a heartfelt thank you to you all. You were a wonderful audience! Everyone, onto the stage!" The trainers, who had been moving around the pool during the performance, probably to help in case of problems, trotted up one after the other. Bedelia called Hannibal over with a short whistle and gave him a signal. The orca opened its mouth and either didn't seem to understand the command or refused the trick, as he just screeched and then dove. Despite another whistle, he didn't come back to his coach, preferring to swim a wide circle around the pool.

Will recalled a snippet of video footage Alana had provided him. Actually, the orca was supposed to come into the shallow area where the water was only a few centimeters deep and pose there with the trainer. Abigail's comment from this morning came to mind. Hannibal didn't like going into the shallows... probably feeling his own body weight like that was uncomfortable for the massive whale.

Bedelia almost seemed to have expected the refusal, in any case she covered the situation very skillfully and Will doubted that the inexperienced viewers in the audience had noticed anything. After another round of applause and a happily strumming closing tune, the coaches marched

away in single file. With a rattle, the gates that had separated the pools for the duration of the performance opened and Hannibal resumed his rounds.

Gradually, the audience ranks emptied. Will dropped his head in his hands, drenched in sweat. He decided to postpone the questioning of the trainers until another day. He would watch the medical this afternoon, exchange a few words with Alana, and then drive home. He really had had enough excitement for today.

The Confrontation

Chapter Notes

Dear readers, in this chapter I start to earn my M-rating! Please mind the tags :)

My thanks go to my beta queuest and to all of you lovely people who left me kudos and comments, I enjoy your feedback very much.

If you are interessted in orcas, marine biology and saving our oceans in general, may I recommend you Robert Marc Lehmann and his series "0800 SEE ORCA". You find him on Youtube and he is awesome! He is german, but his videos have english subtitles and the pictures and videos of the orcas alone are breathtaking!

Will spent the rest of the day wandering between the tanks and watching the fish. There was something meditative about observing them. Gently waving seaweed, the wave patterns in the sand, the play of light on the mosaics. In between, he dared a detour to the park's food court and tried the fish gumbo, which was advertised as "original Creole". It was criminally under seasoned, but edible. At least the fish was fresh, which wasn't always the case with what was on offer in the university canteen.

When he finally almost nodded off on an amazingly comfortable park bench, he decided to wash away his tiredness with a large mug of coffee and was just pondering whether it would be worth buying a sweet pastry when a melodic gong signaled an announcement.

-Dear guests. Thank you for visiting Vergers WaterWorld. The park closes in an hour. Please visit us again soon. Our opening times are…-

Will blinked up at the sky. It wasn't dark yet, but dusk would set in soon. He hurriedly made his way back to the orca pool. On the way there, he was stopped twice by security to tell him opening hours and had to identify himself with the ID Alana had given him this morning. Either security had been tightened since the stray visitor incident, or the guy had been moving around the premises like a ninja!

Hannibal circled restlessly in one of the smaller pools, the gates to the other areas were closed. Alana stood with two men as far from the edge of the pool as possible. She smiled apologetically at Will as he approached them.

“Hannibal always knows somehow when a medical exam is due. We'll keep a little distance until he calms down.”

At the edge of the pool, the blond trainer that Will had already seen during the show was trying to distract the orca with light exercises. However, the whale participated only half-heartedly,

and she had to repeat some commands several times. The orca kept raising its head out of the water and seemed to be looking over at them.

"He does not like us. But as a vet you're used to that. Our patients don't like us on principle." One of the strange men said and shrugged his shoulders.

"These are my colleagues, Doctor Abel Gideon and Doctor Frederick Chilton." The men nodded politely at Alana's introduction. "Abel, Frederick, this is Professor Will Graham. He's here to give an objective assessment of the… incidents."

Doctor Chilton now regarded Will with more interest. "Professor Graham? I read your last paper! Really fascinating insights, I must say. If you have some time tonight-"

"I think we're ready now." The coach's calm voice saved Will from having to find an excuse. He took a few steps to the side to get out of the way. He could see right away that the doctors worked together on a regular basis. Everyone knew what they had to do, the steps they took around each other were perfect. But it was also clear to see that the patient was more than just unwilling.

At the command of its trainer, the orca had rolled onto its back, exposing the white belly, underside of its caudal fin, and pectoral fins. Alana just managed to drain a vial of blood before the whale abruptly dropped and swam away. Doctor Chilton, who had also just tried to take some readings, cursed under his breath.

"Well, better than nothing." Alana placed the blood sample in a small cooler. "Bedelia, see if you can get him in the flat zone. Otherwise we'll do the teeth exam from the edge of the pool." The doctors kept their distance again while the orca seemed to be performing an intricate dance with his trainer. Back and forth, back and forth…

"Is he always like this?" Will asked Alana cautiously. She nodded.

"Ever since he got here," she replied, eyes fixed on the orca. "Maybe he had bad experiences as a calf, who can say that now. His documents didn't say anything about it, either his old park carried out the investigations differently-"

"Or they were sloppy and covered it up." Doctor Gideon joined them, hands in the pockets of his lab coat. "Of course we can't prove that, but let's be honest. This whale is old enough to have had hundreds, if not thousands, of these routine screenings in its lifetime. There is no other reason for his behavior. The Russians screwed him up and now we have to pay for it."

"Just don't let Mason hear that. He's tense enough without thinking he's been ripped off. And the Russians are far away. We, on the other hand…" Alana looked meaningfully at her colleague and raised her eyebrows.

"Sure thing." Doctor Gideon waved him off. "I don't intend to be the one to bear bad news." Will could well imagine that Mason Verger was the kind of person who, when there was bad news, shot the messenger. The reluctance of the doctors was understandable, especially when they had no evidence on hand.

In the meantime, Bedelia had actually managed to lure the reluctant orca into the shallow area. Here the water was only a few inches deep and you could see the whale breathing against its own body weight. At the trainer's cue, the doctors were back to work, knowing they were short on time. Doctor Chilton knelt in the water next to the orca and appeared to be examining a rash behind one of its pectoral fins. Alana was standing next to him, a bag of gear in hand, probably preparing a swab. Meanwhile, Doctor Gideon had been inspecting the orca's blowhole and was now performing a quick eye check.

The orca didn't seem to be in pain. Aside from the fact that the position was certainly uncomfortable, Will could see no reason why the whale should be so reluctant to be examined. Will let his gaze wander over the tableau, trying to arrange the puzzle pieces correctly. He was sure that everything was somehow connected, the accidents, the behavior of the orca, but something was missing.

He looked over at the trainers. Bedelia stood in the shallow water and carefully watched the orca and the doctors. Two other coaches, young men, were busy checking the bars between the pools for signs of wear. Will knew that some killer whales would chew or swim against the bars out of boredom, damaging the mechanism.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Doctor Gideon reach out to pat the orca's nose, much like Will had done this morning. Will remembered the fine lines on the orca's skin and wondered how they had formed.

Then everything happened very quickly.

Doctor Gideon made a startled sound, not even a cry. Just a breathless scream of terror, which seemed to drown out everything else. Will whirled around and felt an ice-cold lump in his stomach. He saw that Hannibal had grabbed the vet's arm, his teeth like a bear trap. Then the orca slid backwards out of the shallow water, back into the pool. Doctor Chilton, who had been kneeling behind the orca's pectoral fin, was dragged along, as was Doctor Gideon. He didn't even have time to scream before the whale dived and dragged him down.

For a moment, Will was frozen in shock. It wasn't until Doctor Chilton came to the surface, spluttering and spitting, that he realized what had just happened.

"Mathew, Barney, get the poles. Hurry!" Bedelia's voice was like a word of God. The two young men dropped what they were holding and started sprinting. Alana and Bedelia rush to the water to pull Doctor Chilton out. The doctor was shaking and appeared to be in shock, his eyes widening.

Will was still standing a few paces from the edge of the pool. In his mind's eye, the final moments played over and over again, like a movie clip. And he knew exactly how it would end.

With an inhuman scream, Abel Gideon came to the surface. He was in the middle of the pool, under normal circumstances only a few strokes from the edge of the pool. But these were not normal circumstances. The dark shadow approaching him from below seemed like something out of a horror movie. The vet only had a few breaths before the orca grabbed him, this time by the leg, and pulled him under the water again.

Air bubbles rose, through the turbulent water surface you could see the man thrashing about desperately, but his movements were already weakening. Then the whale slowly circled upward, briefly breaking the surface to breathe himself.

Apparently the coaches had been waiting for this moment. Bedelia blew her whistle and tried to summon the orca. Although he ignored her, he seemed distracted for a moment and Doctor Gideon was released. He flailed his arms and tried to move away from the whale, but it was obvious that he was badly affected by the orca's bites. Dark clouds of blood muddied the water around him. However, he was close enough to use his uninjured hand to grab one of the long poles the two trainers had retrieved.

"Get me out of here! Oh my god get me out of here!" he yelled, his voice full of panic. His face was chalk white. One of the young men leaned forward and held out his hand, and when their fingers almost touched, Doctor Gideon was yanked back down. He did not surface again.

It would take the whole evening before the vet's body could finally be recovered from the orca tank. Hannibal hadn't wanted to give away his new toy just like that. At first they hoped that he would let go of the body when a gate to another tank was opened, but the orca simply took it with it. He had circled in the large show tank, let go of the corpse, watched it sink to the ground, picked it up again and carried it around with him, letting it fall again. It was a macabre puppet show that could be observed well through the large pane of glass.

Will was thankful he hadn't gotten to eat dinner. Even the gumbo from lunchtime was heavy in his stomach. Up and down, up and down the orca swam, graceful and deadly. This time it was not an accident, no matter how the park's press officer tried to interpret the situation.

In the meantime, the police and an ambulance had also arrived. Not that anything could be done. Even when Hannibal lost interest and the corpse ended up in a strangely elegant pose on the bottom of the tank, you couldn't send a diver in while the whale was still in the same tank. And he seemed more interested in the crowd in front of the pane than a quiet retreat. Again and again he swam up, along the glass wall, and carefully watched the comings and goings. Will thought quietly that the orca seemed amused by the whole bustle.

Alana came up to him, pale and with a blanket around her shoulders. She had been looked after by the paramedics for a while, but now they only looked after Doctor Chilton, who was a bit hysterical. Totally understandable when you consider that it could just as easily have happened to him.

"I think Bedelia will have to change her show," the vet said thinly. "After this incident, no insurance company in the world will allow us to let people into the pool with Hannibal."

She tugged nervously at the sleeve of her blouse. "And Bedelia puts a lot of emphasis on safety anyway. Hannibal once snapped at her ponytail, probably thinking it was a toy. That was at the very beginning, when he had just arrived. It wasn't serious, nothing really happened, but if he had gotten a gripp on her..."

"There's always some risk involved in working with such a powerful animal," Will agreed, still staring at the glass pane. It was now so dark that the body could hardly be seen. "At least Abigail was able to ride him once."

"Oh my god, was that today?" Alana swallowed. "That might as well have been her!"

Will shook his head. “I think a couple of unfortunate factors came together here. Orcas aren't vicious, but I think Hannibal is incredibly bored. Whatever he used to be engaged in, that level is not reached here. And then suddenly he had a new toy. Excitement, movement. Prey. The trainers are not prey, they are social partners. Doctor Gideon..."

Hannibal swam close by them and Alana flinched, taking a step back. Will frowned. This incident would have a profound impact on her work with the orca, and probably not for the better. He gingerly grabbed her arm.

"Come on, you should go home. There's nothing else we can do here. Do you want me to call someone to pick you up?” He led her away. Behind the glass wall, Hannibal hovered in place for a moment, watching them go. When they were finally out of sight, the orca also started to move. With slow, elegant movements he left the large pool. The gate rattled shut behind him and divers prepared to recover the body.

Will slept extremely badly that night. He kept seeing the doctor's chalk-white face before he was pulled under the water for the last time. His gurgling scream, his desperate look... how could it have happened? What went wrong here? After a second startle, drenched in sweat, and a glance at his alarm clock telling him it was three in the morning, he made himself a large cup of coffee and began going through the files.

He printed out some of the photos he took during the show and pinned them to a large cork board. It was easier for him to put things in context when he could see them in front of him. Plus a few photos of the coaches, a press photo of Mister Verger. Mason Verger...that was a good entry point. Will entered the name into the search engine and began digging through the maze of companies and subsidiaries that the Verger family had built up over the years.

When the sun came up his coffee was cold and he hadn't gotten a step further. While Will had a feeling something shady was going on here, he couldn't provide any concrete leads yet. He ran the documents he'd printed out from Alana's computer yesterday through an online translation program again, but the results still weren't that helpful. Whether it was the contracts, the translation program, or Will's lack of sleep, he just couldn't put text together that made sense. Either names didn't match or dates didn't fit the front and back of the specified time periods.

Frustrated, he gave up for now. Hoping for a ray of hope, he scanned the Russian papers and mailed them to Beverly with a request to find someone at the university who could translate for him. Surely that was easier than messing around with this linguistic devil's stuff himself. There were reasons he had become a biologist!

And now? Until he got an answer, all he could do was return to the park and make more observations. But it was still too early in the day for that. So, to take his mind off things, Will logged on to the whale watching forums. Maybe there were some new videos or sightings. Also, it couldn't hurt to ask the community about animal enrichment practices in Eastern European parks. If the Russians had found a new, groundbreaking way to keep orcas from getting bored to death, Will wanted to know about it.

He posted a quick question in the appropriate thread and then clicked through the latest whale watcher posts while waiting for replies. A colleague he knew from a research series on

Norwegian orcas had posted on an older thread about illegal whaling. Apparently a whole school of transient orcas had disappeared without a trace. Of course, there could be other reasons too. Pollution was a constant issue and transient groups traveled long distances. Anything could happen to them. In this case, however, a dead calf had been found, which someone had cut open and filled with rocks to safely dump the carcass. Divers found it by accident.

Will got up and made himself a new cup of coffee. Actually, he was looking for a positive distraction, not the next, heartbreaking story of death and destruction of an already precarious ecosystem. But now he'd started reading, and as long as Beverly didn't call back, he might as well be following this drama.

Not that there was much to follow. Russian whalers were not known for being open about their work. There were only a few guesses, pictures of the dead whale calf and old whale watching pictures showing the young orca with its family. It had been a small school, three adult cows, the calf and an adolescent bull. Will scrolled thoughtfully through the pictures. There was something familiar about those photos, like deja vu. He leaned back in his chair and his gaze fell on the photos on the bulletin board.

The coffee cup he had just raised to his lips was put down roughly on the table, the contents spilling over the edge. But that didn't matter to Will at that moment. With a leap, he jumped up and tore one of the photos he had taken yesterday off the wall. With trembling fingers, he held it to the side of the screen, which showed an old photograph of the adolescent bull just swimming out of a fjord in Norway. The highly erected dorsal fin had exactly the same notch halfway up as Hannibal's.

The Truth

Chapter Notes

Sooooo it is getting serious now! Weeeeehhhhhh

Thank you all for coming with me on this wild ride. Especially my beta queuest who liked this chapter especially <3

May I again recommend to you Robert Marc Lehmann and his series "0800 SEE ORCA". He also has other very fascinating orca-related content which is highly entertaining and very interesting to watch :)

Will sat stunned in front of the computer. Had those Russian whalers really captured a nearly adult wild orca and sold it to an American businessman as a trained show star? It was such a bold move that it could be seen as brilliant! Who would ever think about something like that? The thought alone was so absurd that Will would have liked to dismiss it immediately. But it would explain a whole bunch of abnormalities.

Hannibal's upright dorsal fin, his barely worn teeth. His swimming behavior and the restlessness he showed. If he was actually used to life in the wild, the pool must have seemed incredibly small and cramped to him. Add to that the trauma and the loss of his family. Given these facts, it was amazing that Hannibal wasn't involved in many more incidents. If this theory was true.

The more Will thought about it, the more certain he became. He hastily searched for more pictures of the wild orca to compare with the photos of Hannibal. The shape of the light spots seemed to match, both on the back and behind the eyes. The wild orca also had a few prominent scars on its pectoral fins. Unfortunately, Will's photos weren't high enough resolution to tell if Hannibal had them too. However, that could be rectified. A quick glance at the clock told Will that the park was now open.

He almost left the house in his pajamas, but the cold asphalt under his bare feet brought him back to his senses. Hannibal wouldn't be gone when he got to the park half an hour later.

He was in the shower when the phone rang. Dripping wet, he stumbled out of the bathroom, almost tripping over his own shoes and was just able to support himself on the wall. He answered breathlessly.

"What?" On the other end of the line, he heard Beverly's distinctive barking laugh.

"Very eloquent, Will, really. One might think you were raised by wolves.” He could see her big grin in his mind's eye and had to smile a little himself.

"Good morning to you too, Beverly." He stifled a yawn and leaned his back against the wall. Water dripped from his hair onto the floor.

"Long night?" she asked. Will rolled his eyes, glad she couldn't see him.
"Yesterday was a terrible day," he finally admitted. "Have you seen the news?" He couldn't imagine that the incident could be kept under wraps for long. Although the park had already been closed, there were simply too many eyewitnesses.

"There was only talk of an accident in the park, nothing concrete. Investigations ongoing, blah blah. The usual." Well, no one had forbidden Will to talk about the incident. And as the day progressed, more and more details would leak out anyway.

"There was another death. Practically before my eyes." He shuddered, but that could also be due to the rapidly cooling water that was still dripping down his neck.

"Not the orca?" Beverly seemed stunned. Before yesterday's events, Will would have sworn that an orca would never attack a human. Well, they had been wrong.

"Absolutely the orca. Drowned one of his vets." Will took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Something's wrong there, I know it for sure."

"That fits. Antonia translated your documents for us." That was fast! Will was genuinely impressed.

"Antonia?" He mentally ran through the undergraduate and graduate students in Beverly's research group, but many of them he only knew from casually passing by. He had successfully avoided most of the department dinners this semester.

"Price's new girlfriend. Antonia Chekhova, the microbiologist. She looked at the papers and says they're probably fake. The orca is said to have been born in an aquarium in Moscow and then loaned out to various parks where it has performed. But some of the institutes mentioned do not exist at all, the periods of time are strange, and of the people listed who are said to have looked after him, at least one is not a veterinarian but a trauma surgeon." Will clenched his fist triumphantly. That was as good as proving his theory! A few additional photos and they had a solid report.

"I'm going to the park right now. Have to check a few things. I'll ask a few questions inconspicuously." It was common in the transport of marine mammals for trainers to accompany the transferring animal in the early stages to help it get used to a new environment. Maybe someone in the park could remember the people who brought Hannibal here.

"Will Graham, you're as inconspicuous as an anemonefish in a bathtub." Will was barely listening to Beverly, his mind already on the way to the park.

"I'll call you back tonight. Thanks for the translations." Will mumbled into the phone. His gaze darted across his desk. What did he have to take with him? His camera, preferably the waterproof one, a bigger zoom lense…

"Yeah, no problem. I'll mail it back to you. Be careful, do you hear me? And talk to Jack before you do anything!"

"Sure. Don't worry. See you later.” Without waiting for an answer, Will hung up. He remembered just barely to go back to the bathroom and turn off the shower he'd so hastily exited a few minutes ago. After that, he threw on a shirt that was hanging unironed over the arm of the sofa and slipped on, alternately hopping on one leg, in a fresh pair of jeans. A few minutes later he was already in his car on the way to Vergers WaterWorld.

The orca tank was closed to the public, but his employee ID allowed Will to slip through security with ease. It was just before noon, all the trainers were busy feeding and preparing for various shows, so Will had the area all to himself. That suited him quite well, as he could avoid curious questions about yesterday's events.

The backstage area of the show pool was a mess, apparently no one had managed to clean it up after yesterday's drama. Will carefully stepped around the toys, feed buckets, and barrier ropes to get to the pools.

Hannibal greeted him with a high-pitched whistle and Will smiled against his will.

"You're not actually a bad guy, are you?" he said quietly, crouching down at the edge of the pool. "You were just unlucky. Just like Doctor Gideon, in the wrong place at the wrong time. If they suddenly locked me up and forced me to perform tricks in front of an audience, I'd probably freak out too, eventually.” The orca swam up to him and pushed out of the water right in front of Will. The reflections of the sun off his back showed off the scars Will had noticed last time. Gossamer lines that ran in a strangely regular zigzag.

"Like a net." Will took his camera out of his pocket and quickly snapped a few pictures before the orca could dive again. "All the signs are there, just look out for them," he muttered to himself.

The orca made a strange, low-pitched creaking sound that echoed around the empty stadium. Will recognized these sounds from various recordings of wild killer whales, they were used to communicate between members of a pod.

"And you are here all alone. I hope we find your group and you can go back to your family.” Against his better judgement, Will ran his fingertips over the orcas' heads. "But no matter what, I promise I'll get you out of here." A male orca could also connect with another group. But if this animal, and it was beginning to look like it, had actually been caught in the wild, he didn't belong in a tank, he belonged back in its natural habitat. He had a chance, and Will would do anything to take advantage of it.

"Professor Graham! Already back with us?” The loud voice behind him made Will wince and he got up so quickly that he almost fell into the water.

"Ah- good day Mister Verger," he said after regaining his balance.

"After the unfortunate incident yesterday, I didn't expect you to be back here so soon." The businessman casually approached. With his suit and leather briefcase in hand, he looked oddly out of place in the lakescape of the various pools.

Will shrugged and looked away. "It was an accident. But I think I found the reason for Hannibal's behavior.” That was the opportunity! If anyone might be interested in Will's

discovery, it's Mason Verger. Surely he would be able to recoup some of his investment while also keeping his insurance company happy if Will could prove that the supposedly well-trained star of the show was a semi-feral orca who would certainly be better off in the wild .

Will hastily dug out the printout of the picture that had put him on the right track this morning. "Look at this picture!" He handed it to the businessman, who took it with pointed fingers. The biologist suppressed a small grin. Really, the coffee stains on the paper had long since dried!

"That looks like an orca's dorsal fin?"

"It's not just any dorsal fin! I'm pretty sure that orca is Hannibal! The shape of the light spots, the characteristic notch here. This photo is less than two years old. I think you were sold a wild orca here, probably fraudulently." Will had to force himself to pause and take a deep breath.

Mister Verger frowned, obviously extremely annoyed. "That is unbelievable! Have you told anyone about this yet?" He began to shift his feet uneasily and looked around as if he were looking for someone. Probably one of the trainers to vent his displeasure. After all, the trainers in particular could have noticed earlier that something was wrong.

Will shook his head. "No, I wanted to make sure. Take some pictures of Hannibal so there's more material for comparison." He looked around searchingly. His camera was still at the edge of the pool. He hastily leaned forward to show Mister Verger the images of the net-like scar patterns on Hannibal's head.

The hard blow caught him completely unprepared. He saw the clear blue water of the orca pool coming towards him and felt it coolly close over him, then everything went black.

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When Will regained consciousness, the first thing he felt was the cold. His legs were numb, his fingers were freezing, and he was shaking all over. There was also a dull, throbbing pain at the back of his head.

His eyes were gummed up, he could barely open them, and when he tried to sit up, his hands slipped on the wet, smooth, rubbery surface he was lying on.

"Will! Oh my god Will! He's alive!" Was that Alana? Where was he? What happened?

Will took a deep breath and coughed. He smelled and tasted salt. He slowly raised his still painfully throbbing skull and rubbed his face against his shoulder to clear his eyes. His shirt was damp. Did he fall in the water? Now he also felt the waves gently lapping at his legs. He blinked open his eyes and immediately wished he hadn't.

A wave of intense nausea overcame him and he lowered his head, hoping not to throw up. That was the last thing he needed…

"Don't move, Will, stay calm. We'll get you out of there!" Yes, that was definitely Alana. She sounded concerned. Will had no idea where he was or what had happened. He took a deep

breath and opened his eyes again. This time the nausea was manageable and he squinted against the reflections of light off the water around him. At first he thought he was on a boat because he was moving slowly through the water. But then he realized that he was draped across Hannibal's back and the orca was making slow circles in his tank with him.

"Fuck." Now it wasn't just the cold that made him shiver. He looked around carefully. At the edge of the pool stood Alana and a couple of trainers, all white as a sheet. Did he fall in the water? How long has he been here?

Apparently, the orca sensed that its involuntary passenger was conscious again. He picked up some speed and sank a bit deeper into the water. Will swallowed nervously and felt for the towering dorsal fin with his left hand. Should the whale dive, he had two options: try to swim and reach the edge of the pool before the whale caught up with him, which was a doomed endeavor given his desolate condition. Or hold on to the dorsal fin and hope that the whale didn't stay under water too long. As long as he was on his back, Hannibal couldn't grab him. Will still vividly heard Doctor Gideon's last desperate cry before the orca pulled him under.

"Damn, don't kill me now, Hannibal. How am I supposed to get you out of here if—" If he died in an unfortunate, orca related accident. All of a sudden the memories came back. His discovery this morning, the call to Beverly. Hannibal was not a captive born and raised orca. He was a wild animal. There had never been a fatality in the wild where an orca had attacked humans. On the contrary, their close relatives, the dolphins, were known to protect swimmers and surfers from sharks and save them from drowning.

The orca exhaled raggedly and a fine spray misted Will's face. With fingers that were still slightly trembling, he carefully stroked the black smooth skin of the whale and thought feverishly. The exact circumstances of his fall were still unclear, but the persistent pounding in the back of his head told him he hadn't jumped into the orca pool willingly. Someone had knocked him down and pushed him into the pool to drown him. Most likely, Hannibal would have been blamed and Will's death would have been dismissed as another tragic accident.

Will gritted his teeth. He wouldn't give up that easily! Hannibal had saved him, kept him on the surface so he wouldn't drown. He gratefully patted the broad back he was lying on. "I owe you one, big boy. Now take me to shore and I'll get to work. Jack owes me a few favors anyway. Just wait, we'll get you out of here."

And as if the whale understood, he changed course. His circles got wider and with each lap he got closer to the edge of the pool, where the trainers broke into action. Very organized and deliberately quiet hustle and bustle, Will had to acknowledge. The trainers were obviously trying not to irritate or startle the orca. Alana shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, hands clasped in prayer. Then, just an arm's length from the edge of the pool, the whale dived abruptly, leaving Will snorting and flailing his arms in the water.

Hands reached out to him and pulled him out of the pool. The shaking came back in full force and Will's knees refused to support him. He sat at the edge, shivering and surrounded by worried strangers.

Alana crouched next to him and gently placed a hand on his trembling shoulder. "Breathe deeply," she said softly. Her eyes were wide and her lips trembled. "You are safe."

Will just nodded silently.

"Can you move your arms and legs? Wiggle your toes.” She nudged him encouragingly and he had to laugh despite everything.

"I have too many legs to pass for your patient, Doctor Bloom," he protested.

She giggled and some color returned to her pale cheeks. "I wouldn't ask a seal to wiggle its toes. But I think I might be able to handle a first aid procedure for humans just fine. So, be a good boy and tell the nice doctor where it hurts.”

Will made a face. "Everything is still in place, even if my toes are little blocks of ice at the moment. But I have a headache like never before.” He reached up and felt his way through his matted curls until he found the spot on the back of his head. "Right here... Ouch!"

Alana pushed his fingers aside. “Oh yes, that looks like a nice laceration. I can imagine that you have a headache. And probably a concussion as well.” She eyed him critically. "Did you fall? The wound is in an odd place for that- and if you just fell backwards on your head, how did you fall into the pool?” She looked around, searching. "And there's no bloodstain anywhere, either. That wound certainly bled, head wounds always do.”

"Hey, what's Hannibal got there?" Bedelia's astonished exclamation startled Will and Alana out of their thoughts. They looked over to the water where the orca was indeed pushing a small black box in front of it.

"My camera!" Will yelped.

"Well, that thing is probably done for." One of the trainers shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not necessarily. It's a good model that should be waterproof.” Will replied.

"Yes, but is it also orca-proof?", Alana asked with a smile and got up.

"We'll see about that in a moment. Hey, big boy, can I have that back?” Will cautiously slid closer to the edge of the pool and held out his hand. The orca did come in, the camera's shoulder strap between its front teeth and the housing balanced wobbly on his nose. Gingerly, Will reached for the camera and gently tugged at the strap until the whale finally opened his mouth and released the device.

Bedelia nodded approvingly. "Not bad. Apparently he's having a good day today.” After yesterday's terrible accident, the orca's behavior was indeed remarkably different.

Will eyed the camera critically. There were no dents, no teeth marks or scratches. Apparently he hadn't dropped the camera. Whoever hit him must have thrown her in the water with him, probably to destroy evidence.

"So, is it still working?" one of the trainers asked, leaning over Alana's shoulder to see the display.

Will gently pressed the on/off button and to his great relief the device came to life with a gentle whirring sound.

"Cheers to technology!" laughed Alana. "Did you want to take pictures of Hannibal?"

"Yeah, I noticed something yesterday." Will wasn't sure if he should tell the vet right now, but showing her the patterns on Hannibal's head couldn't hurt. He switched to a view of the last pictures and froze. The camera displayed a shaky picture that he didn't remember taking.

"Is that- is that Mason? What's he holding in his hand?" Alana asked in an uncertain voice.

Will swallowed. "I think we should call the police," he finally said, still keeping his eyes on the image of Mason Verger hitting him on the back with one of the heavy dive rings.

Freedom

Chapter Notes

My thanks go to my beta queuest and to all of you lovely people who left me kudos and comments, I enjoy your feedback very much <3

The police interrogation lasted forever. Or maybe it just seemed that way to Will because people kept barging into the small office Alana had made available to them and interrupting the questioning. First, there were two paramedics giving Will emergency care, then Beverly and her two graduate students, who had been briefed by Alana; then a lawyer from the amusement park, who was hurriedly escorted into an adjoining room, and finally an angry Jack Crawford, who insisted on reading Will the riot act in front of the assembled team.

Will was so exhausted by this point that he only partially understood what it was all about. He'd been given a blanket to drape around his shoulders, but his jeans were still damp and clung uncomfortably to his legs. His thin shirt was almost dry, albeit even more crumpled than this morning. He sipped the watery coffee that had been handed to him and patiently waited for Jack to run out of breath.

Beverly sat across from him and rolled her eyes in amusement. She knew well enough the outbursts of the head of the faculty board.

"I wasn't expecting that from you in particular, William Graham." Hands on hips, Jack came to a temporary halt, staring at Will with a grim knit of his eyebrows. Will sighed and began his explanation.

With the help of Beverly and Jimmy Price, he actually managed to explain the tangled chain of evidence he'd built up over the past few hours in a way that was halfway understandable. The strange accidents, Hannibal's behavior, the photos on the forum, the scars on the orca's back, the suspicious paperwork, and finally the photo he apparently accidentally took when the park's owner knocked him out.

"And where is this Mister Verger now?" Jack demanded to know. He looked like he wanted to tell the shady businessman exactly what was coming for him. Jack Crawford, former animal rights attorney for Greenpeace, didn't take illegal animal trade lightly.

“He is currently in custody. The charge at the moment is only assault.” The officer present explained, slightly intimidated. Jack snorted derisively and cracked his knuckles in anticipation.

"Well, let's see about that! Will, Beverly, I want all the paperwork you have on this on my desk tonight.”

Will sighed and gave Beverly a guilty look. He hadn't intended to involve her in this. But Beverly just winked at him and at least didn't seem to mind Jack's homework.

Will was eventually sent home, with a stern warning from paramedics to call an ambulance immediately in case of prolonged nausea, sudden dizziness, or blood from any orifice. Beverly offered to drive him.

"Two birds with one stone, Graham! You're no danger to other drivers and we can endure the meeting with Jack tonight together." She said with a big grin and pulled him by the arm to her small car. Zeller and Price squeezed into the back seat, grumbling softly. They dropped the two doctoral students off at the train station and continued to Will's small apartment, where the first thing he did was change into dry clothes.

"It's much easier to bear with dry socks," Will said, sinking onto his sofa. Beverly stood at his desk and looked at the bulletin board where Will had pinned the photos and reports just this morning. Was that really just this morning? It felt like an eternity had passed.

"Very professional, Graham. Very CSI, I have to admit." Beverly teased and Will tried a tired smile, which he only half managed.

"It's such a strange thing. I wonder if they'll ever find out who sold Hannibal to Verger." Exhausted, Will laid his head on the back of the sofa. With half-closed eyes he looked at the photos showing Hannibal's performance. "I mean, you have to come up with an idea like that first. And the logistics behind it all!"

"Let Jack take care of that. You did your job and you're out of it." Beverly dropped into his office chair, which squeaked in protest, and swung around to face him.

Will sighed. "Not quite. I promised Hannibal I'd get him out of that damn tank."

"Want to keep him in your bathtub?" Beverly asked, eyebrows raised in doubt.

Will sat up with a groan and looked at his colleague seriously. "He should go back to the sea."

A little later he had to have the same conversation a second time with Jack, who gave him a similarly critical look as Beverly.

"An orca raised in captivity doesn't stand a chance in the wild," Jack said, looking at Will over the top of his reading glasses with a strange mixture of sympathy and irritation. On the desk in front of him was all the papers they'd collected on the case in a untidy pile.

"But Hannibal didn't grow up in captivity!" Will clenched his fists and took a deep breath to stay calm and matter-of-fact, which wasn't easy for him after the day's events. "The papers are fake! According to my investigations, he has been in captivity for a maximum of two years and if we slowly get him used to it in an outdoor enclosure, he has a good chance of living free!"

Jack sighed deeply. "The cost-" he began, but Beverly supported Will.

"Jack, we have the story of the century here. An illegally caught orca? With a good chance of surviving in the wilderness? It shouldn't be a problem raising funds for it. Think about the publicity." She waved her arms excitedly, nearly hitting Will, who hastily leaned to the side.

Jack looked at him mockingly. "Publicity? And you're in, Will?”

Will shrugged and looked away, embarrassed. He knew Jack was thinking about all the press conferences he'd almost had to drag Will to. "It's for a good cause."

"This isn't going to be easy." Jack leaned back in his chair, fingers laced together. "But I'll see what can be done."

"Thanks Jack," Will said, bowing his head wearily. "If there's anything I can do to help-"

"I'll get back to you. Now go home and go to bed, you look like you're about to pass out."
He wasn't wrong. Beverly almost had to carry Will the last few meters to his apartment door and when he was finally in bed he fell asleep before he could take off his shoes. The next morning began with a pounding headache that even a hot shower and a large cup of black coffee could only partially alleviate.

So Will took it easy, wrote a very passive-aggressive report on the whole incident for his insurance company and the police, and then lay down on his sofa for a quick nap around noon. When he woke up it was already dark and his cell phone was blinking reproachfully.

"Oh damn." He hated sleeping through the day like that. Now he would have to stay awake through the night and the next day in order not to throw his circadian rhythm completely out of sync. With a deep sigh, he made himself another cup of coffee and scrolled through his missed calls. Jack, Beverly and, to his surprise, Alana had left messages on his voice mail.

With a quick glance at the clock, Will decided not to call anyone else today. There was still time for that tomorrow. Instead, he sat down at his computer and clicked through various news sites for a while, which presented the events of the past few days with varying degrees of realism. Some made him smile, other reports were downright outrageous lies. He wasn't sure which was worse, the activists calling for the immediate dismantling of all aquariums worldwide or the hardliner faction citing a horrific isolated case and calling for the orca's "elimination".

Luckily, there were also plenty of well thought out and reasonably well researched articles and Will took the time to write a short forum post to inform the colleague who put him on the right track of the whereabouts of the last member of the little orca pod.

Eyes burning, he finally got up and padded to his kitchen corner, where, after much deliberation, he poured himself a cup of mint tea. He sat down by the window, holding the warm cup of fragrant beverage in his hands and watched the sunrise. It promised to be a bright, beautiful day. Actually perfect for taking the boat out, fishing a little and just drifting along.

It didn't come to that, however, because when he finally brought himself to call Jack back, it turned out that there had been some unexpected advances regarding Hannibal. Apparently, given the ever-growing list of allegations against Mister Verger, the paks management had agreed to consider the orca for potential release if an appropriate animal welfare organization would take care of the transportation costs and the overall process.

Will could hear Jack smirking over the phone as he recounted the conversation with Cordell Doemling, who was acting as Mason's right-hand man. Apparently, the latter had first tried to

pressure Jack with accusations against Will and, when this did not get him anywhere, launched a wild tirade against "militant do-gooders".

"One could almost get the impression he doesn't like us," Will commented dryly.

Jack laughed heartily. "I really don't care. These bastards deserve someone to step on their toes. Nothing but inflated suits full of hot air."

Will leaned his head against the cool window glass and watched two seagulls fighting over half a bun on the roof of the house across the street. "And you have someone on hand who can pick Hannibal up?" he asked without hoping for a concrete answer. However, he had underestimated Jack.

"Of course I do!" Jack sounded extremely pleased with himself. "The National Aquarium in Baltimore offered us the use of one of their cordoned off bays."

"Of course, that's ideal! When do you want to start?" Will asked, now fully focused. That exceeded his wildest hopes!

"I'll discuss that today. But be ready, I have the feeling that the suits want to get things over with as quickly as possible, public relations and such."

Will snorted derisively. In his experience, publicity just unnecessarily prolonged an action. All sorts of people wanted to be interviewed and in the worst case, some authorities would suddenly notice you and feel they had been stepped on because you hadn't asked for their opinion or permission. It was better to venture out publicly after an action, when the work was done and when in doubt you could just run away and wait for some new attraction to come along.

Jack didn't need to know that though, so he just made a few approving noises. The phone call ended shortly thereafter and Will fervently hoped that Jack's contact person was genuinely interested in expediting the orca's release to the wild.

Contrary to Will's fears, however, things quickly got moving and just a few days after Will's involuntary bath in Hannibal's tank, he was again at the edge of the pool.

Trainers and technicians scurried around him, setting up a small crane to hoist the orca, who weighed several tons, out of the water. The whale was once again confined to the smallest pool and was swimming in tight circles at the surface. He seemed to want to keep a safe distance from the edge of the pool and Will watched worriedly as he ignored the trainers' whistles and commands over and over again.

Alana stepped next to him and smiled at him a little tightly. You could tell that she too was electrified.

"Long day?" Will asked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

The vet smiled and her forehead smoothed out a bit. "Long week. A long month to be honest. In hindsight it all makes sense. Hannibal's behavior, the incidents... I keep wondering if I should have noticed something sooner."

"Don't worry about it. Nobody expected something like that.” Will tried to calm her down. Before Alana could go on about her lack of detective skills, Bedelia stomped over to them. The head trainer's face promised a full-fledged thunderstorm.

“Hannibal completely ignores us. If we don't get him into the transport mat soon, we'll have to postpone the whole thing."

Indeed, the orca had dived and holed up in the back bend of the pool, far from the stretcher mat that was bobbing sadly in the water. The construct of bars and risers didn't look particularly confidence-inspiring. Will had seen whales and dolphins lifted from their tanks and placed in shipping crates a number of times. It was always a stressful situation for everyone involved. On the one hand, you didn't want to hurt the animal, on the other hand, you didn't want it to be able to wriggle out of the carrying device on the way.

“We were hoping not to have to drain the water. That's always a lot of stress for him, but I'm afraid we can't avoid it.” Bedelia had her hands on her hips and looked like a woman who had finally reached the end of her line of patience. Will couldn't blame her. Then he had an idea.

"Wait a second. I think I can get him out of his corner.” The pool didn't have corners, but that didn't matter now.

"What are you up to, Professor?" Bedelia asked suspiciously. Will merely gestured vaguely at the orca. He could not have put his idea into words even if he had wanted to.

Alana gently placed a hand on the trainer's arm. "What harm can it do? You go talk to the techs, if Will can't calm him down we're going to have to drain the water in any case."

Taking this comment as implied permission, Will trotted along the edge of the pool. Halfway between Hannibal and the scaffolding he sat down, took off his shoes and half-heartedly rolled up his pant legs. Then he put his bare feet in the water.

It was generally accepted that orcas were highly intelligent creatures. They had their own language with regional dialects, they recognized members of their school even years after they had separated, they used complicated hunting tactics and coordinated with each other. Will had no doubt that Hannibal knew exactly what the harness meant. And he couldn't blame the orca for resenting being crammed into a metal box like an oversized sardine and transported around in stifling confines and darkness with no say in the matter.

Unfortunately, there was no point in explaining to an animal the need for this transport, any more than in reassuring a house cat before a vet visit that it wouldn't be all that bad. At least, that's what Will was trying to tell himself as he sat there, his toes getting colder and colder, staring at the gently rippling surface of the water. Hannibal was an orca, a very intelligent animal, but even just-

He was so caught up in the philosophical argument with himself that he flinched violently when a black nose gently nudged the soles of his feet.

"Hey, Hannibal," he said, struggling to steady his pulse. The orca opened its mouth and made a soft, creaking sound. The ivory-white teeth looked downright menacing this close to Will's feet,

but against his better judgment, the biologist sat quietly. As hopeless and idiotic as his idea was, he at least wanted to try.

"I can imagine that this transport thing is very uncomfortable for you," he began, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "But if we want to take you back to the sea, we have no other option." The orca blew a fine spray into the air and looked at Will unperturbed. "Yes I know. If you have a better idea-"

The orca grabbed Will's foot. Gentle, almost cautious, but with the deadly relentlessness of a multi-ton predator. Will caught his breath. He heard a horrified yelp behind him and footsteps rapidly approaching. Without turning around, he raised his hand. The footsteps stopped and an icy silence fell over everyone present. Hannibal kept eye contact with Will. He didn't pull, just held the foot between his teeth.

"Oh fuck," Will muttered. "You probably haven't eaten anything today." But the whale still made no move to pull him into the water. "What do you want from me? What do you want to achieve?" He let his gaze wander. The pool, the carrying mat in the water, the crane that was supposed to lift the orca out of the water and put it in the transport box. The metal transport box, waiting like a gigantic coffin to be filled. Will shuddered. Alone in the dark, surrounded by strange noises, powerless…

He looked down again and regarded Hannibal. "Do you want me to come with you?", he asked carefully and even if he would deny it for the rest of his life he knew at that moment that the orca understood him perfectly. Hannibal sank a tiny bit deeper into the water, his teeth gently tugging at Will's foot. The biologist took a deep breath, looked over his shoulder at the trainers and technicians who watched him with bated breath and chalk-white faces. He smiled faintly, gave a quick wave, and then slid off the edge of the pool into the water.

Will was a very good swimmer. He had also fallen off boats or jumped into the water often enough not to lose his nerve with the sudden temperature shock. Hannibal had let go of his foot immediately and so he could comfortably swim and orientate himself, treading water. The orca had dived again and a small part of Will's brain was playing the last seconds of Doctor Abel Gideon's life on a continuous loop. He did his best to ignore these images.

"Will, what are you doing? Get out of there!" He turned and looked up at Alana, who had fallen to her knees at the edge of the pool and held out her hand to him. He shook his head.

"Don't worry. Hannibal's just a little nervous." He tried to calm her down.

"That's one more reason to get out of there immediately. Will-" Her voice was shaking even worse than her hand.

"I know what I am doing. Alana, we all want to get this thing over with as quickly as possible. So please just let me try." Without waiting for her reply, Will started swimming. Away from the saving edge of the pool into the territory of a predator. He had only made a few strokes when the orca appeared silently beside him. Will gave him a look and it seemed as if the whale was laughing at him. Will spluttered in mock indignation.

"You're not particularly elegant on land either, my dear." His pace must have seemed ridiculous to the orca. Will bravely continued to swim toward the stretcher mat, Hannibal keeping pace

with him. When they reached the mat, Will grabbed one of the chains to pull himself up, but once again the whale's jaws closed on his foot. Hannibal pulled him back into the water and Will's pulse shot up, but the orca released him immediately. Instead, he pushed his body between Will and the harness.

Will put his arm over the orca and let himself drift. "I'm staying with you. I promise. If it is absolutely necessary, I will sit with you in this tiny box. If in return you promise not to crush me," he told the whale seriously. He was probably going to catch a terrible cold, but the water temperature wasn't life threatening as long as he stayed conscious and kept moving.

Long, agonizing minutes passed. Will watched Bedelia shooing two technicians back and forth at the edge of the pool, glaring at him again and again. Apparently she didn't think much of his idea. Finally, Hannibal slowly started to move. He swam a tight circle around Will and finally slipped into the first loop of the transportation mat. Hustle and bustle erupted overhead.

Will hurried to swim alongside the harness to Hannibal's head so the orca could see him. The whale was breathing heavily and was visibly stressed, but stayed still as the crane, groaning softly, began to lift the mat out of the water.

The thick fabric stretched around the heavy body. Hannibal's pectoral fins poked out of a recess in the fabric like awnings, and the orca let out an unhappy squeak. Without thinking twice, Will held on to one of the chains and was lifted out of the water. For a moment he dangled helplessly in the air until his feet found purchase in a fold of fabric.

The crane driver looked up at him and Will could clearly see that he would have liked to make a comment but didn't dare. Instead, without a word, he swung the crane arm around and lowered the stretcher, complete with orca and biologist, into the shipping crate.

After some back-and-forth, Will was actually allowed to ride in the shipping container, but on the condition that Bedelia stayed on as a spotter in case something went wrong. While Will wasn't sure how to help if Hannibal decided to attack him, he just nodded, grateful to be able to avoid a lengthy discussion. During the drive there was an icy silence, apparently the trainer took offense at Will's initiative. Only the whale's heavy breathing echoed off the tight metal walls.

The distance to the netted bay wasn't far, but it seemed like an eternity to Will. When the convoy finally came to a standstill and the transport box was opened, the sound of the sea and the gentle gurgle of the waves on the shore could be heard. Screams of seagulls filled the salty air that rushed in through the open hatch.

Beside him, Will felt a tremor run through the large body he had been leaning against for the past few hours. He stumbled to his feet in the container's knee-deep water, his bare feet almost numb from the wet cold. His shirt was stuck to his back and his hair was straggly in his face. Despite everything, Will couldn't have been happier. They were so close to their goal!

"Freedom, my friend," he whispered, putting his hand on the orca's head.

Chesapeake Bay

Chapter Notes

I am on vacation and in a writing mood, so this chapter is early!

My thanks go to my beta queuest and to all of you lovely people who left me kudos and comments, I enjoy your feedback very much <3

The cove was small, in fact probably smaller than the pools where Hannibal had spent the last years of his life. Nets restricted the freedom of movement of the orca, but the air was filled with the calls of seagulls and small fish darted back and forth in the crystal-clear, cold water, startled by the commotion.

A narrow street led to the concrete footbridge where Will was now standing, a woolen blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He was shaking and his lips were probably blue, as were his toes and fingers. But he couldn't bring himself to leave Hannibal alone on the last stretch to freedom and so he and the orca had been lowered into the water together. And it wasn't until the carrying device was removed and the whale swooped powerfully down into the depths of the Chesapeake Bay that Will had allowed himself to be helped ashore.

Someone handed him a thermos of hot tea, but Will's eyes were only on the choppy surface of the water. Real waves, not the calm ripple of a tank. In the middle of the bay a high dorsal fin broke through the water. Will watched as the orca picked up speed, dived, and then catapulted himself through the air in one wild leap.

Behind him people applauded and cheered, cameras clicked. The whale seemed to hang in mid-air for an infinite moment. Weightless, free, majestic. The sun's light caught on the fine droplets of water, which glittered like a torrent of diamonds. Then he fell back into the water with an impressive splash. Will smiled and for a moment all was right with the world.

Then Jack Crawford put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him in front of a camera to make an official statement. The crowd of reporters and other onlookers billowed and foamed around him like unusually noisy seaweed. Will gritted his teeth and tried to come up with short, clear, vaguely polite answers.

No, Hannibal posed no danger to the public.

No, orcas didn't eat humans and yes, the deaths were purely accidental.

No, he didn't have much hope of releasing more orcas. Hannibal was an exception as he was raised in the wild and only spent a relatively short time in captivity.

No, he could not say anything about the status of the investigations against Mason Verger and Vergers WaterWorld, that was a matter for the prosecutor's office and the police.

The questions began to repeat themselves and Will threw pleading looks at Jack until Jack finally agreed and pulled him out of the fray under the pretense of putting on dry clothes. As they walked away, Will heard that Bedelia was now being cross-examined as head trainer.

"So it's safe to go into the water with the whale?" asked a short, chubby man with a high voice.

"The water is way too cold for that. This outdoor enclosure is also intended to prepare Hannibal for life in the sea without human contact. So no one is allowed to…" Will couldn't understand the rest of the sentence. He shook his head, always surprised by the thoughtlessness of some people.

Jack lent him a jacket so he could at least take off his wet shirt. Once again Beverly drove him home in wet pants.

"Don't make this a habit, Graham," she admonished cheerfully as he climbed out of her car, clammy and exhausted.

"I'll try," Will said, deciding to always carry a change of clothes with him in the future. Wet pants were terrible. To avoid catching a cold, he stood in the shower until the water came out of the showerhead only lukewarm and then spent the evening on his sofa with a cup of canned chicken soup and his phone. He had a plan and needed a few favors to call in, but in light of the events of the past few days, he met little resistance, which was a first for him. Usually people tried to talk him out of his crazy ideas instead of supporting him. Today was a nice change.

When he got to the bay the next day, the crowd of onlookers had grown even larger. On the rocks near the waterline, some young fellows were scrambling, apparently unfazed by the tape. Cameras clicked every time Hannibal surfaced.

The day was overcast and the low clouds made the water appear dark. The wet sand looked just as colorless, making the onlookers' brightly colored windbreakers even more garish. A few feet above the waterline, someone had rammed a pair of surfboards upright into the sand like a makeshift picket fence. Two children were building a sandcastle.

From his vantage point along the road, the orca appeared more relaxed than Will had ever seen him in his tank. He ignored the people on the beach just as he had ignored the onlookers in the park, but his circles were calmer and every now and then he seemed to be chasing one of the small fish that got through the mesh of the barrier nets and into the bay. That reminded Will of his load.

Armed with a small cooler, he stalked down the slope and greeted the two biologists from the National Aquarium, who were sitting on two folding chairs in front of a trailer, watching the onlookers with a mixture of amusement and resignation.

"They're still quite reasonable, apart from the idiots down there on the rocks," the older of the two commented dryly, sipping from his thermos mug. "And if one of them falls, it'll just be a few abrasions, maybe a sprained wrist. The water is so low on the rocks that no one will drown there." Will nodded and briefly explained what he was planning. With the blessing of the officials in his pocket, he walked along the cordoned off pier that jutted out into the deep water. At the end, a small ladder led down to a wooden platform that swayed happily on the waves.

Will's boots had barely touched the damp wood when Hannibal rose out of the water. The orca lifted its head out of the waves, opened its mouth, and squeaked at Will. He laughed and fell on his knees in front of the orca.

"Good morning to you too," he said, casting a critical eye over the whale. The dark eyes were clear, he could see no fresh scratches or abrasions the whale might have suffered from the new, unfamiliar terrain. Hannibal had spent the last few years in a slick, sterile tank, with no one able to predict exactly how he would do in his new environment. But he seemed to be doing great.

"They want to keep you here for observation until tomorrow. If everything goes according to plan you'll soon be a free whale." He pulled the small cooler towards him with a soft scratch. "I know you should get used to hunting your own food again. But I figured you could use a little snack on the side."

Getting fresh seal meat hadn't been easy, but Will had good contacts. He mentally apologized to Jack, whom he usually cursed heartily and loudly when he dragged him to conferences for networking. Now it was actually very helpful to have contacts at various institutions and zoos.

"If my theory is correct, you're more used to having marine mammals on your menu," he explained to Hannibal, lifting a shapeless mass of meat and white fat from the box, which he offered the orca for inspection. "But I don't blame you if you- Ok, no problem."

The whale had almost snatched the dripping mass from his hands. A good two kilos of fatty seal meat were gone in a fraction of a second and judging by the expectant open mouth, Hannibal was extremely happy with the food offered. Smiling, Will fed him the rest of the cooler's contents. It was a good sign that the orca recognized its natural prey and ate it with no problem. They probably wouldn't be able to serve him a live seal, but the biologist was sure that the hunt would not pose a problem for Hannibal.

He stayed a while longer on the small platform and watched the orca, which went about his own business again, but kept swimming by at irregular intervals to check if Will was still there. When the biologist finally got up, the whale swam hurriedly over as if to say goodbye. Will laughed at himself when he caught himself doing the classic humanization of a wild animal that he himself so often criticized in others.

"See you tomorrow, Hannibal," he said, climbing up the ladder to the jetty. The orca let out a long whistle and dove again.

On his way down the jetty back to shore, Will noticed the short, chubby man who had been here yesterday asking questions. He stood just behind the crime scene tape and looked longingly out at the water. As Will approached, the stranger looked at him with wide eyes. The biologist's hopes of getting away scot-free were nipped in the bud.

"Oh, he's so graceful!" the little man babbled. "So noble! So ethereal! A being beyond human imagination!" Will, who had watched this ethereal being drown a human, pressed his lips together. The stranger was undeterred.

"I was so happy when I heard that he was taken out of there. And that I would have the opportunity to see him so close here! I went to the park so many times, you know, so he

wouldn't be alone there. I see myself as spiritually connected to him and now his soul is in harmony with the world again...” He gazed out at the water with reverently folded hands.

"I see." That was a blatant lie, Will didn't understand a word, but he wanted to remove himself from this one-sided conversation as quickly and painlessly as possible. "Well, you'll be happy to hear he's about to leave this bay too and be a completely free whale."

The stranger blinked, puzzled, and looked at Will's small cooler, which the biologist was still holding. "But I thought… who's going to bring him his food then? I thought he was fed regularly?”

"That was just a last test." Will shrugged. "He can hunt his own food like all free orcas do. But that reminds me, I have yet to let my colleagues know what Hannibal's condition is like."

With a curt nod, Will quickly stalked back to the National Aquarium construction trailer and confirmed to the two biologists the success of the little experiment. This was greeted with great enthusiasm and immediately recorded on a clipboard. Will was offered a folding chair and decided to spend a little more time here. At a safe distance from the onlookers and their strange views.

The crowd on the beach had thinned out a bit, probably many had gone home to eat. But some had picnic blankets and sandwiches with them and seemed to be preparing for a longer observation phase despite the unstable weather. Even the talkative stranger was still standing at the barrier to the jetty.

"Well, when do you ever have an orca so close in front of your nose?", remarked the younger of the two biologists. “We are using the opportunity to the best of our ability. Do you want to listen to our hydrophone recordings? The big guy isn't particularly talkative, but he's loud!'

Will indeed wanted, so they retreated to the trailer to match Hannibal's whistles and calls with familiar whale noises. The pattern that emerged confirmed that the orca belonged to a transient group that likely preyed on seals and other marine mammals.

"But his call pattern is extraordinary. Of course, each group has its own dialect, but by and large we are familiar with the sounds that orcas make. But this call-” The biologist pointed to a spike in the orca's vocal profile. "I've never heard that before." It was a high-pitched whistle followed by a longer vowel. With a bit of imagination, it sounded like "Mi—aa".

Will frowned in concern. "I hope Hannibal will find a connection to a new group. He's so far from his original territory, and even if he finds his way back there—” His family was dead. There was nothing for the orca to return to.

The mood was noticeably depressed when Will said goodbye to the two biologists. It had started to drizzle and the crowd had thinned significantly. Only a few particularly brave souls in weatherproof clothing remained at their posts. Will trotted to his car, where he first had to wipe the raindrops off his glasses before he could leave.

Only when he got home did he realize that he had forgotten the small cooler. It was probably still standing in front of the trailer where he had been sitting. Will sighed and hoped he would remember to take it back tomorrow. It made a good transport box for the fish he caught on his

occasional trips to the little river up at Wolf Trap. Not too big, not too small. Beverly had given it to him and he was attached to the old thing. To be absolutely sure, he stuck a note on the steering wheel of his car.

The next morning was cold and clear, the clouds had parted and the early rays of the sun made the raindrops and puddles of the previous day shine. Today Will was early, the beach was empty. A forgotten picnic blanket lay in the sand and as he looked around he noticed a gap in the picket fence of the surfboards. He found the missing board a little later, gently rocking on the waves. Had the wind blown it into the water? The surfboards seemed to be buried too deeply for that.

The crunching of car tires on the gravel behind him snapped Will out of his thoughts. He greeted Jack, who had been keen to be a part of today's decision, and Beverly, who said that she was only there for moral support.

"Not that I have any doubts about your composure." She grinned broadly at him and sipped on her Starbucks coffee mug. "But who knows what kind of bullshit these suits will pull out of their sleeves to prolong this procedure unnecessarily?"

“If it comes to that, I'll-" At Jack's sharp look, Will cleared his throat and corrected. "It's possible that an unknown person could loosen the net at night and release Hannibal into the wild without permission."

"There's always danger." Beverly nodded, a Madonna-like smile on her lips and eyes sparkling with laughter. "But since the decision today will certainly be in Hannibal's favour, there shouldn't be such drastic measures." She looked down at the water. The light wind conjured up whitecaps on the waves, which washed over the rocks with a gentle murmur.

"Hey, is that your cooler down there?" she asked abruptly.

Will's eyes followed her outstretched hand. Indeed, in the shallow water stood his little chest, half hidden behind a rock.

"I definitely wasn't down there yesterday." Will wasn't sure when or where he left the box, but it definitely wasn't on the beach.

Beverly shook her head, hands on her sides. “Probably some youngsters who were joking around. This cove isn't really secured, is it? If you want to come here in the evening, you can do that too.”

"Anyway, better get that thing back or you'll forget it again," Jack grumbled absently as he flipped through his papers. "In half an hour at the latest it will be teeming with reporters and onlookers, then I'd like to be on the jetty."

Will could only agree with him. He scrambled down the rocky slope to the beach and trotted along the water. His shoes left clear imprints in the damp sand. When he reached the chest, he paused and looked around, but couldn't find any clear clues. The rain had washed the sand smooth, but apparently there were still enough people at the stand afterwards. Numerous footprints and shoeprints led along the water, in and out of the waterline.

He grabbed the handle of the chest. To his surprise, it didn't appear to be empty. He lifted the lid and discovered a pair of black leather shoes. Who wore leather shoes on the beach? He looked around as if the owner of the shoes would miraculously rise out of the water, but there was no one in sight. Deciding to dispose of the shoes later, he closed the lid again and hurriedly took the freezer to his car.

Beverly looked up from her phone as he rejoined them. "Are you okay?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. She just knew him too well.

"Someone put shoes in it. I do not understand why. Why in my cooler?" Sometimes people really were a mystery to him.

"Maybe someone wanted to see Hannibal up close and thought they could lure him in with it?" Beverly speculated.

A chill ran down Will's spine as he remembered the little man who had spoken to him yesterday. Surely he hadn't been that daring? And at these water temperatures? Certainly not, he tried to calm himself. Out in the bay, the orca broke the surface of the water, blowing a cloud of water droplets into the air. He seemed calm and relaxed. Surely everything was fine. There was no blood to be seen, no other clothing, no corpse. Will tried hard not to think about how deep the bay was. What currents there could be that would hold a body to the bottom until the crabs and small fish had dismembered it beyond recognition.

The arrival of the Vergers WaterWorld delegation, as well as several other cars carrying representatives from the National Aquarium and journalists, prevented Will from becoming entangled in a web of dark thoughts. He was pale and a little shaky, but luckily all he was asked to do was nod in agreement, shake a few hands, and finally sign a statement with other biologists as official reviewer that the orca T087, Hannibal, was ready for was a reintroduction and would now be released into the wild.

Margot Verger, Mason Verger's sister, represented the official owner and had the honor of untying the net separating the bay from the open sea. They were standing in a large, slightly shivering group at the very edge of the bay when the net was pulled aside. Will's heart was getting lighter and as the orca leisurely swam past them, he had a big smile on his face.

"Farewell, Hannibal," he whispered into the wind. He was sure that he would not forget the encounter with this orca. Although he would probably never see him again.

The Future

Chapter Notes

Originally, this was the last chapter of the story. But the inspiration hit me and so the story continues to go on for quite a while :)

A big "Thank you" to my beta queuest and everyone who has stuck with me to this point, who left me kudos and/or nice comments. I'm incredibly happy that you have so much fun with this little story <3

By the way, if you like Hannibal, the killer whale, maybe you will like Hannibal, the tiny blue ringed octopus?
Check out "Down Where It's Wetter" by RedFive! I did not know this fic before I started writing, but Libertine recomended it and it is great!!!

Empty eye sockets stared reproachfully at Will. A small crab scrambled out of the slightly open mouth and ran across the bloated skull, its hair swaying like stringy seaweed in the gentle swell. A shadow slid across the bottom of the bay and when Will looked up, the distinctive black and white pattern of an orca filled his field of vision.

Drenched in sweat, the marine biologist woke up with a start. He had kicked off the blanket, it was lying on the worn wooden floor in front of his bunk. With a sigh, Will sank back onto the threadbare pillow.

Really, wasn't it enough on his nightly excursions to be confronted by ghost nets full of dead dolphins or beaches littered with oil-smeared, dying animals that Will knew perfectly well were real? Did it have to be a fictional corpse? A man Will had only seen once and who was probably alive and well? Sometimes he wished his imagination was a little less active.

A glance at the clock bolted to the small shelf next to the bunk told him it wasn't worth going back to sleep. Groaning softly, he got up, trying not to wake the others, put on a clean shirt and went into the cabin to turn on the coffee maker.

While the water ran softly spluttering and gurgling through the coffee filter, Will looked out the window, lost in thought. The little porthole was a bit green around the edges, but they had scrubbed the boat from top to bottom and checked it over before they left on this research trip. So he could clearly see the sloshing waves, the seagulls hovering over the water, and the white spray whipped up by the wind.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and raised it to his lips. More for warming his hands and enjoying the scent than actually sipping it, it was still too hot for that. Still in his socks, he climbed the narrow stairway to the deck. The wind was cold and tugged relentlessly at Will's curls, blowing them in his eyes again and again. The biologist turned away, trying to gauge

how much longer he could put off a haircut, when he caught a glimpse of movement in the water.

He whirled around, coffee sloshing out of his cup and spilling over his fingers, but he didn't care at that moment. With a wide grin he saw the high puff cloud that betrayed the presence of a whale. Too high for a dolphin. Will didn't see a whale at first glance, but he eagerly stepped to the railing and let his eyes wander over the water. Maybe a minke whale, or a fin whale? Then a high dorsal fin broke through the water just a few meters from the small research boat and Will nearly dropped his cup in excitement.

They were still too far south to reliably count on sightings of orcas, so he hadn't dared hope to see one. Yet here it was, as if Will had dreamed it up himself. With a musing smile, Will watched the orca as it gracefully dove into the depths of the Atlantic.

"Why are you up so early?" asked a sleepy voice behind him.

"I couldn't sleep," Will answered without turning around. "So I made coffee."

"Your coffee is terrible." Beverly grumbled and joined him at the rail. "You do know that the goal isn't to completely dissolve the stomach lining, right?"

"Just put more sugar in. Or make your own.” Will's gaze darted across the waves. "I just saw an orca," he said, careful not to show his excitement too clearly.

"Really?" Now Beverly was wide awake too. "Cool! I haven't seen wild orcas in ages. A good sign for the ecosystem here.” She placed her half-empty coffee mug on the deck and retrieved her camera from one of the supplies boxes.

They stood side by side in silence. Will could feel the dampness of the spray slowly seeping through his socks, but he didn't want to go down to the cabin to put on shoes. The irrational fear of not seeing the orca again kept him on deck.

When the dorsal fin broke through the surface again, Will had to control himself not to erupt in loud cheers. He was a pro, after all, and Beverly didn't need any more ammo to tease him. The camera clicked next to him. The whale glided past them, slowly, as if searching for something. Will noted the bright spots on its back and the small notch halfway down its dorsal fin. His breath caught. Could it be?

"Say, Will, isn't that-" Beverly began, apparently having exactly the same thought.

"Hannibal? Possibly.” Will's fingers felt clammy, his mind spinning.

"Call him!" Beverly nudged his side roughly. "Come on, what's the worst that could happen? Maybe he recognizes you?”

Will cleared his throat. Then he took a deep breath. Beverly was right, what was the worst that could happen?

"Hannibal!" His voice echoed across the water and the orca, who had already swum a good way past them, made a sharp turn.

"I can't believe it, it really is him!" Beverly squeaked enthusiastically and jumped up and down next to Will.

The whale - could it really be Hannibal, maybe it was just a coincidence - came to a halt beneath them, lifted its head above the waves and let out a high, piercing whistle. At that moment, Will knew with absolute certainty that it was Hannibal. He dropped to his knees and looked down through the railing at the orca.

"Hello Hannibal," he whispered. The whale opened its mouth, showing rows of deathly teeth, and seemed to smile.

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When they returned to port a few days later, Jack was already waiting for them, a tall blond stranger in a dark wool coat at his side. Normally, the sight of Jack filled Will with apprehension, but today nothing could dampen his good spirits.

This trip had officially been a research trip, but he quickly realized that Beverly had just needed an excuse to drag him out of his apartment. She had correctly recognized that Will was in dire need of a change of scenery, and nothing clears the mind quite like a week at sea, surrounded by wind and seagulls.

Meeting Hannibal turned out to be another part of their ingenious plan. Really, the woman could probably have taken over the world if she had been in the mood. Instead, she'd meticulously tracked all sightings of orcas along the coast and maneuvered the boat to a spot that provoked an encounter. The fact that the orca was actually Hannibal was pure, happy coincidence.

Will had not been able to bring himself to resent her Machiavellian plans. Not when he'd fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep every night, dead tired and exhausted after a day in the water with a wild, free orca that hadn't shown any sign of aggression toward him. Hannibal had even performed some of his old show tricks unsolicited, to the great amusement of Zeller and Price, who had stood at the railing in a cheering audience while Will was carried around by the bemused orca.

It had been very difficult for him to say goodbye to the whale last night. But it had been a relaxed, if melancholic farewell. Beverly had taken numerous photos and Will had hopes of meeting the orca again, although the odds were slim.

Beverly tossed an anchor line to Jack when they were close enough. A short time later the boat was moored and they all stood together on the narrow jetty. Jack had his collar turned up and his hands buried deep in the pockets of his coat. Apparently he had been standing here for quite a while.

Will tried to assess the stranger next to Jack. His hair was combed straight and the first gray strands ran through the pale blond at the temples. Even so, he didn't look old, and his broad shoulders gave an impression of self-confidence. A brightly patterned handkerchief hung from the breast pocket of his coat, which inevitably drew attention. Then Will's gaze met a pair of

piercing maroon eyes and he felt his face heat up. Embarrassed, he lowered his eyes. It was actually against his habit to stare at people like that, no matter how eccentrically they were dressed. He wasn't in any position to criticize other people's fashion sense, honestly.

Beverly had no such qualms and quite frankly looked the stranger up and down. Then she turned to her superior. "Hey Jack, I wasn't expecting you at all today. What gives us the honor?"

Jack grinned widely, a triumphant glint in his eyes. "There were new findings in the investigations in Eastern Europe. Interpol was called in because of the forged papers and the suspicion of tax fraud," he announced with great satisfaction.

Zeller snorted derisively. "You know, murder and manslaughter is ok, but don't you dare go to the state coffers," the doctoral student grumbled to himself and Price patted his shoulder reassuringly.

Jack ignored the unqualified objection and continued. "Anyway, some of the names on the documents could be traced back. Most of them are fakes, albeit very good ones. One of the alleged vets is Doctor Lecter here. He immigrated years ago, but studied in Europe." He gestured towards the stranger, who gave them a friendly nod. "He currently works as a trauma surgeon in Baltimore."

"Very pleased," Doctor Lecter said, and Will tried to place the rolling accent. Eastern Europe, maybe a southern impact?

Beverly smiled and held out her hand, which Doctor Lecter shook heartily. "Likewise, doctor. I'm Beverly Katz and this stoic guy is my colleague, Doctor Will Graham."

Will also enjoyed a firm handshake. He felt his face blush again, though he couldn't exactly say why.

"Hannibal Lecter, it's a pleasure to finally meet you. Jack has already told me a few things about your adventures." The doctor's words took a moment to find their place in Will's swirling thoughts.

"Hannibal?" he finally managed, blinking in astonishment.

"Indeed." Doctor Lecter smiled at him and only now Will realized he was still holding the other's hand. He quickly let go and buried his hands in his jacket pockets.

"Those guys named the orca after you?" Beverly asked curiously.

"Possibly. The name is so rare that it's probably no coincidence," Jack agreed. "The noose is tightening!" He rubbed his hands together as if he couldn't wait to get his hands on the masterminds himself.

While Jack and Beverly discussed the progress of the investigation, Doctor Lecter pulled Will aside. "I have a feeling I know you from somewhere, Doctor Graham," he said thoughtfully, eyeing Will with a strange intensity.

"Just Will, please. Otherwise I feel like I'm in a lecture," Will replied. "Maybe we met at a conference? I'm not good at remembering faces…" Nor names, which could be because Will hid behind Jack most of the time at said conferences and wished with all his heart that he was somewhere else. Preferably on a boat in the middle of the ocean.

"That's quite possible." Hannibal nodded and smiled conspiratorially at Will. "Some conferences are terribly crowded and you meet so many people. Sometimes in the evening I can hardly remember who the business cards I collected during the day belong to."

Will had never taken business cards to a conference in his life. He was pretty sure he didn't own any, although there were some forgotten treasures slumbering in the depths of his desk drawers. Maybe he had business cards somewhere. He shrugged. When he was forced to give someone his contact information, he usually scribbled it down on a scrap of paper.

"I just don't find humans as interesting as sea creatures," he finally admitted, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. It was clear that Doctor Hannibal Lecter was a socialite. In complete contrast to Will, who would describe himself more as a recluse.

"Well, I'll try my best. May I invite you to dinner, Will?" Doctor Lecter asked, gently laying a hand on Will's arm. Will looked at him dumbfounded, feeling like he'd missed an important part of the conversation.

"I... dinner? he stammered.

"Well, I find you extremely interesting, Will. I'd like to get to know you better," Doctor Lecter said, little laugh lines forming in the corners of his eyes.

Will was still desperately searching for an appropriate, polite answer when Beverly appeared at his side. "Cool, thanks for the invitation. Don't worry Doc, I'll make sure Will is on time."

"Beverly!" Will hissed, aghast, nudging her side roughly to silence her, but she merely put an arm around his shoulder, ignoring his desperate attempts.

"That's very kind of you, Miss Katz. Here's the address." Doctor Lecter handed Beverly a business card and gave Will a friendly nod. "I think this is the beginning of a wonderful acquaintance. See you tonight, Will." He said a quick goodbye to Jack and walked away along the jetty.

As soon as he was out of sight, Beverly burst out laughing. "Oh Will, you should see your face!" she spluttered as Will stood by, arms crossed. "Really, he invited you to dinner, not to your own execution!"

"I don't need a nanny, Bev. Really, I've got this covered," Will said, plucking the business card from her hand. "And there's no need to doubt my punctuality either."

"Of course not." Beverly raised her hands apologetically, still grinning widely. "What was I thinking?" She patted his shoulder. "Well then get on your way. Zeller and Price can help me unrig the ship. You go home and put something nice on for the doctor."

Will rolled his eyes. "It's not a date, Bev. Just a chat, nothing more."

Beverly looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

Will quickly ran through his interactions with the Doctor in his head. "Yes?" He could hear the doubt in his own voice.

With an amused snort, Beverly gestured toward their cars, which were parked in the small gravel lot overlooking the harbor. "Understood. Still, you shouldn't go to an invitation in these pants. And put on a shirt with no holes if you have one."

Will knew when it was time to make a strategic retreat and made a hasty departure. And, if he was honest, he actually wanted to wear something else. From the way Hannibal Lecter acted, the restaurant he chose was certainly one of those where the waiters wore tails.

And even if the appointment wasn't a date, there was still nothing wrong with making a good impression.

The Doctor

Chapter Summary

> A big "Thank you" to my beta queuest and everyone who has stuck with me to this point, who left me kudos and/or nice comments. I'm incredibly happy that you have so much fun with this little story <3

The address of the restaurant on the small cardboard card was completely unknown to Will. He blindly followed his navigation device along a coastal road. The sunset over the sea was breathtaking and Will rolled down the window a bit to feel the wind on his face and get some rest.

Formal dinners had never been easy for him and already he felt like an impostor in his rarely worn jacket. He had even toyed with the idea of wearing a tie, but had refrained from doing so. Just the fact that he had thought about dressing up like that pissed him off. What made Doctor Lecter different from all the other people, PhDs and non-doctors, that he used to meet at conferences? Nothing! And hadn't he broken out in a cold sweat a few weeks ago when Doctor Chilton wanted to ask him about his latest paper?

Following the navigation device's instructions, he turned down a side street and continued brooding. Perhaps the events in Vergers Water World had just straightened his world view a bit? There were clearly worse things than having technical discussions with strangers. And Doctor Lecter appeared to be a decent person, albeit with a slightly eccentric taste in fashion.

A few houses now appeared between the green hills. High fences bordered the street on both sides, now and then you could see a gate. Where the hell was he? Had he mistyped the address? At the gleeful announcement, "You've reached your destination," Will pulled up in a gravel driveway. That couldn't be right? There was no sign of a restaurant anywhere, he was somewhere in an upscale residential area! Exasperated, Will dug out the business card, which only contained the address and a telephone number. Strange… He re-entered the street into his GPS, but the result was the same.

A gentle tap on the window made Will jump. He hadn't noticed that someone had approached him! He turned his head, an apology already on the lips, and found himself face to face with the kindly smiling Doctor Lecter. He wore an elegant suit with silver-grey pinstripes, and a complexly folded silk handkerchief hung from his breast pocket like a blood-red waterfall.

"Good evening Will. As I can see, you've found your way without trouble."

"Ah… yes, thank you." Will felt his face blush again and cursed himself inwardly. Somehow Doctor Lecter managed to throw him off balance without any effort on his part.

"Park your car back there, next to the house." Obediently, Will parked his car in a small, cobbled courtyard beside a dark green Bentley. His car looked even smaller and shabbier next to it than it already was.

Taking a deep breath, Will got out and trotted to the door where Doctor Lecter was patiently waiting for him. "Thank you for the invitation, Doctor."

"Hannibal, please." He corrected him gently and held the door open invitingly. "And it's a pleasure to have you as my guest, Will." The biologist bowed his head, it would take some effort for him to use the name he had previously associated with an orca for the well-dressed doctor.

As Will entered the foyer, his last doubts perished. This house was clearly not a restaurant. Doctor Lecter, or rather Hannibal, had invited him to his home. Damn, should he have brought a gift for his host? A bottle of wine or something? Flowers even?

Unsure how to proceed, Will paused in the entrance hall. The building was a veritable mansion, with high ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows that let in the last light of the evening. Dark furniture, marble tiles on the floor. Hannibal came up behind Will and gently tugged at the hem of his jacket. The biologist was reluctant to part with the garment, but it would certainly have been impolite, so he left the jacket to the doctor, who hung it on an intricately carved coat rack. Marine life arranged in a gently curving pole, with the tails of fish being used as cloth hooks.

"I'm not quite done with the dinner preparations yet. Would you like to join me in the kitchen for the moment?" Hannibal asked and, at his mute nod, led Will through a door into the adjoining room.

Will let his gaze wander curiously. Through a door he could see into another room, apparently the dining room. Here, too, dark colors prevailed, all very elegantly combined with tiled stone floors and modern touches. The kitchen was dominated by a large, well-lit work island in the center and a gigantic silver-grey fridge on the wall. Everything seemed very clean and orderly, although Hannibal was evidently in the process of conjuring up a multi-course menu.

The room seemed strangely sterile and uninhabited to Will. There were no magnets on the fridge, no shopping lists, no postcards or souvenirs from any trips. There was a small collection of oils and spices on the counter, but no cookbooks. Will thought of his own little kitchenette and chuckled at himself. The organized doctor would probably find his apartment chaotic and untidy, with lots of notes and unorganized stacks of books everywhere.

To gather his thoughts, Will watched his host garnish two plates with a dark red sauce with surgical precision. He seemed peaceful and in harmony with himself and what he was doing.

"Where did you learn to cook?" Will asked curiously, resting his chin on his hand. "That looks fantastic!"

"Thank you, Will. I've picked some things up here and there, some from my aunt, some from studying in France." Hannibal gave a playful bow and smiled impishly at Will. He had to grin.

"It was worth it, I would say. If it tastes half as good as it looks..."

"Oh, I hope so. I am very peculiar about what I eat. Quality is not something I want to skimp on. Here.” Hannibal pushed an open bottle of wine into his hand. "Please take this wine over to the dining room. I'll be right over with the appetizer.”

Will obediently carried the bottle into the next room. Here, too, dark wooden furniture and a floor-to-ceiling wall of plants dominated, however, it was only sparsely planted. There were large gaps between the individual plants, as if the wall were brand new.

"I haven't been here for a few months," Hannibal explained, entering the room with two plates in his hands and obviously interpreting Will's looks correctly. “Because of a family matter in Europe. It always takes a little while to settle back in.” He shrugged. "Unfortunately, most of the plants didn't survive my absence, despite my cleaner's best efforts to keep them alive."

The meal was a whole new experience for Will, who usually thrived on cheap pub grub, fast food, or canned food and rarely bothered to use his kitchen for its intended purpose. Hannibal, on the other hand, had raised cooking to an art form and served up a sophisticated three-course meal, each dish having a fancy name that Will immediately forgot.

The meat was tender, the sauce thick and creamy and the vegetables fresh and crunchy, all the components arranged as if the plate were about to be photographed for a cookbook. Hannibal accepted Will's praises with a saint-like smile, Will could tell the Doctor was truly invested in his role as host.

"I like to cook, it's like a meditation for me. If I prepare my own food, I have full control over what goes inside my body." Hannibal explained between bites. "And I figured you'd be more able to relax in a smaller, more intimate setting than in a restaurant." Apparently, even after just a brief meeting, he was able to gauge Will very well.

"Well, I can safely say that I've never been to a restaurant that comes close to this quality." Will said, looking down in embarrassment. Next was probably the lukewarm buffet that some big hotel conferences had. "I would have had no idea which fork to use for which course."

"Well, maybe in the future I'll have the opportunity to broaden your culinary horizons a bit." Hannibal smirked and poured Will some more wine.

The conversation wandered aimlessly from topic to topic, from culinary to an art exhibition Hannibal had recently visited and from there to the most beautiful port cities. They both agreed that while New York was most impressive at night, they both preferred ports with older charm. Will had fond memories of Quebec, while Hannibal raved about the old castles in Stockholm.

"Although Venice is not to be scoffed at either." Hannibal sipped his wine and leaned back and relaxed. Meanwhile, they had moved from the dining room to the library.

Will grinned. "It is obvious that you've spent a large part of your life in Europe."

Hannibal cocked his head. "Where have you spent your life, Will?"

"On the water." The answer came without Will having to think too much about it. He had lived by the water since he was a child, and his father even had a houseboat for a while. "I never wanted to be anywhere else." He shrugged.

"And you've taken up a profession that ensures you can always go back there."

Will wasn't sure he liked the direction this conversation was taking. He let his eyes wander, looking for another subject, and his gaze fell on a small stack of books lying on the desk at the head of the room. One of the covers looked familiar.

"Hey, is this ‘behavioral research on cetacea in the euphotic zone’?" He picked up the book and turned it over. His own face was looking at him from the cover and he wrinkled his nose reflexively. Not that there were many flattering photos of him, but did his publisher really have to choose this one?

Hannibal stepped beside him. Through his shirt, Will could feel the body heat radiating from the other man and he had to fight the impulse to lean against the broad shoulder. Goodness, how much wine had he had tonight?

"It's a very fascinating read. I'm always striving to broaden my horizons.” Hannibal's deep voice so close to his ear sent a shiver down Will's spine. Then he heard a gentle intake of breath and hastily turned to his host.

"Did you just smell me?" he asked in disbelief.

Hannibal showed no remorse. “Unfortunately, that is unavoidable with this aftershave. It smells like it came out of a bottle with a ship on it.”

"Slander!" Will protested, laughing, even though he had to admit that Hannibal was right. The aftershave had been a gift from Beverly and in the absence of an alternative he's just been using it ever since. It sometimes kept overly intrusive people off his back at conferences if he dosed it high enough.

Hannibal showed him the rest of the house and everywhere Will could feel that the master of the house hadn't been there for a long time. Not for something as mundane as dust, oh no! All surfaces were immaculate, windows cleaned, carpets unstained. But there was nothing lying around, the small stack of marine biology books the only indication that they weren't on a film set. Of course, it could also be that Hannibal was a morbidly orderly person, Will didn't want to completely rule that out. After all, the man wore a three-piece suit within his own four walls, so anything could be possible..

However, as they stepped out onto the terrace and strolled through the garden, Will noticed an enormous hole. In the middle of a lawn, at least two meters deep, it gaped like an open wound in the otherwise well-tended garden.

"What will it be when it's finished?" he asked the host. "A pool?" The pit would be big enough in any case.

"Exactly not that," Hannibal replied. “Once upon a time there was a pool. I had it removed.” He said it casually, as if it were simply a question of a new flower pot.

"Why? A pool that big must have cost a lot of money.” Will had no idea what such a makeover would cost, but it certainly wasn't cheap.

"I just couldn't stand it anymore. In addition, it has never really fit into my garden concept. Those smooth walls, the faux blue, the tiles... I think I'll make a natural pond instead." Hannibal shrugged and led Will to a low natural stone wall that demarcated the garden. Behind them the ground fell away steeply and far below them the sea roared in a small bay. Will grinned widely and leaned on the uneven rock to look down.

"I like the view," he said, closing his eyes to enjoy the wind blowing up from the water.

"That was one of the reasons I bought this house," Hannibal admitted. "Plus, part of the beach down there is part of the property."

Will took a closer look and saw steps on the cliff that someone had painstakingly carved into the rock. He raised his eyebrows. "You're not going to tell me you climb down here to swim in the sea?" he asked in disbelief.

Hannibal laughed. "Well, as long as I don't have a pool, I guess I have no choice. And it's not as bad as it looks."

They watched the blood red sun sink slowly into the sea. Then they retired back to the library, where Hannibal lit a small fire in the hearth. They sat facing each other with freshly filled wine glasses. At Hannibal's casual request, Will began talking about his work.

"...and the highlight last month was the wild orca that some whalers caught and then sold to this amusement park as an alleged show star." Will shook his head, still finding it absolutely incredible.

"I read about that. And of course Jack told me a lot." Hannibal said with a knowing smile. Will had deliberately avoided following the press hype for the first few days. The numerous half-truths and lies only hit him in the stomach and drove up his blood pressure.

"How do you actually know each other?" he asked curiously. While Jack was far more socially active than himself, his sphere of influence extended primarily within the academic circles of the university. And the university didn't have a medical department, not even a veterinary one. Otherwise, Will might have opted for a career in veterinary medicine when he first started college.

"I am acquainted with his wife, we move in similar circles. That's why he recognized my name when he looked through the documentation for this orca." Hannibal explained. Will was only superficially acquainted with Bella Crawfort. However, she had always been very kind to him when they met, despite his obvious distaste for large crowds.

"There probably won't be that many Hannibal Lecters," Will agreed. "It's a strange coincidence that they used your name."

"They probably just picked names at random from medical journals. I've published a few articles, but more in the human medical field." Hannibal sat back and sipped his wine. A relaxed silence spread. A log crackled in the fireplace and the flickering flames cast confused shadow patterns on the walls.

The Ocean

Chapter Notes

A big "Thank you" to my beta queuest and everyone who has stuck with me to this point, who left me kudos and/or nice comments. I'm incredibly happy that you have so much fun with this little story <3

Will snapped awake as Hannibal gently took the wine glass from his fingers, which was already listing threateningly. "What… oh crap, what time is it? I really didn't intend to strain your hospitality like that!"

Hannibal laughed softly and pushed Will back into the outrageously comfortable cushions of the chair he'd just almost fallen asleep in. "Don't worry Will. It's not that late. But I'm afraid with the amount of wine we drank over the evening I can't take responsibility for letting you drive yourself."

"I can take a cab-" Will began, still struggling to get his brain going again.

"Nonsense, I have a fully functional guest room. Just stay the night and tomorrow, after breakfast, you can go home without any worries. Or do you have an urgent appointment?" the doctor asked.

"I… no." Will admitted after a moment's hesitation. "No, I don't have any appointments tomorrow. I have to be back at uni for the start of the semester and we just got back from a research trip."

"That's wonderful." Hannibal rubbed his hands enthusiastically. "Now that we have that settled, may I offer you something other than wine? I have a selection of juices and of course water."

Will eyed his half-empty glass, trying to remember how much he'd drunk over the course of the evening. Maybe it really wasn't a bad idea to put something non-alcoholic in his body before he got the bill for his recklessness in the morning. He struggled to his feet and followed Hannibal into the kitchen.

Inside the gigantic refrigerator, alongside a collection of carefully labeled Tupperware, were a row of bottles with a colorful array of juices. Amused, Will examined the labels. "Gosh, that's quite a choice. Sauerkraut juice?" He wrinkled his nose.

"It's good for digestion. Here, try this." Hannibal handed him a tall glass with a dark red content. Will sipped it carefully. The juice tasted acidic and a little metallic, but very refreshing.

"That's delicious," he admitted, taking another sip. "I think the weirdest thing I ever drank was a seaweed wine that Beverly found somewhere." That had been while he was studying for his

exams. He'd almost driven himself insane, and Beverly, then a graduate student, had done her best to distract him from time to time.

"Beverly seems like a good friend," Hannibal remarked casually while putting the juice bottle back in the fridge.

"The best," Will agreed wholeheartedly. "I don't know what I would do without her. She also helped me follow all the leads and translate the documents we had in the Verger case."

Juice glasses in hand, they returned to the library, where Hannibal resumed the conversation."It must have been quite a hassle. From what I've heard, the Verger case has made waves in all sorts of circles."

"Well, once we had someone who could translate the Russian text for us, it wasn't that bad. Verger, the self-righteous asshole, apparently didn't expect anyone to ever find out about him. Bastard. There is a person who I would have actually not begrudged to be drowned by an orca in his own park." Will bared his teeth spitefully.

"Instead of the vet? Doctor Chilton, if I remember correctly." Hannibal's voice was as calm and composed as if they were discussing the weather. Will, on the other hand, almost talked himself into a rage, which was certainly also due to the alcohol consumed.

"Oh, did they publish his name? Typical, no regard for family." Will shook his head disapprovingly. Unfortunately, some media did not take victim protection as seriously as they should. "Well, things were a little different with Doctor Chilton. I mean, I can't blame the orca. The situation was definitely fucked up, he couldn't leave, he had to let everything happen to him and at some point he just had enough. I know that, sometimes I feel the need to push Zeller and Price overboard and leave them in the middle of the sea."

Hannibal tilted his head and gave Will a piercing look. "But you don't."

"Well, Beverly would blame me. Good people are hard to find and the pay we're getting from college is underwhelming." He threw a hasty look at Hannibal. "Not that I'm a particularly homicidal person or anything-" Only now did he realize that maybe he should tone down his ranting a bit.

The doctor, however, seemed completely unconcerned and waved it off with a friendly smile. "Oh, I think we all have impulses like that sometimes. No reason to justify yourself. Neither in front of ourselves nor in front of others. Such thoughts can be a healthy outlet."

Will breathed a sigh of relief. "Right, a healthy outlet. And I probably wouldn't be able to throw those two idiots overboard anyway. The railing is too high in most places."

"Security aboard." Hannibal nodded in agreement. "There are enough dangers when you are at sea. Without any human intervention."

"Absolutely! I mean, no one is ever completely safe, I could be run over by a car at any time when I'm moving on land, but man's just not in his element at sea. We are always aware that we are putting ourselves in danger when we leave port. But that is part of it."

"You can only minimize the risk."

The conversation dragged on until Will could barely keep his eyes open. Hannibal put out the fire, which was already low, and led Will upstairs. Behind a heavy wooden door was an elegant, if impersonal, room. On the wall hung an enormous painting of a sinking ship being torn apart by some kind of sea monster.

"Do you need help, Will?" the Doctor asked gently, and Will shook his head vigorously.

"I'm not drunk," he protested, waving his hands. "Just a little tipsy." Will flopped back onto the bed. The dark blue bedspread was soft and he took the opportunity to stretch extensively.

"Of course. But you should at least take off your shoes before you go to bed." Will narrowed his eyes at Hannibal. Was the guy making fun of him? But there was nothing to be seen in Hannibal's face. It was a nice face, Will decided. Takes a little getting used to with all the sharp edges, but nice. Especially when Hannibal smiled and little wrinkles formed in the corners of his eyes.

"Will?" Hannibal gently placed a hand on his knee. Will smiled dreamily up at him.

"I like your eyes," he explained and yawned.

Hannibal laughed softly. "Thank you very much for the compliment. Here, let me help you." He gently slipped off Will's shoes and helped him struggle out of his pants. Then he pulled the bedspread out from under Will and tucked him in. Will fell asleep before his host had even left the room.

When Will woke up again, the sun was already shining through the large windows. At first he didn't even know where he was. Only gradually did the memories return and he buried his face bashfully in the pillow. What did Hannibal have to think of him?

There was a glass of water on the bedside table next to an unopened packet of aspirin and on the chair next to it, carefully folded, Will's only pair of good trousers and a white shirt that did not belong to him. The strange garment was too big, he had to roll up the sleeves, but after tucking the bottom hem into his pants, he looked quite presentable.

The first door he opened led him into a bathroom, the second into an empty closet where another bed could easily have been placed. Who the hell had so many clothes that it took an entire room to hold them? The third and last door finally led Will into the hallway. From here he easily found his way to the ground floor, which was empty. There was already a light in the kitchen, but his host was nowhere to be seen. It wasn't until Will noticed the open patio door that he remembered Hannibal's comment from last night.

"He's not really going to swim in the sea, is he?" Will wondered in a low voice and stomped through the still damp grass across the lawn to the low stone wall. Indeed, a lonely white towel hung over the mural and down in the water he could see a human shape. Will carefully descended the steps to the beach.

"Isn't the water too cold for swimming?" he called over the sound of the waves.

Hannibal turned to him, grinned and waved. "Said the marine biologist," he scoffed.

"When I go in the water, I have gear on to avoid hypothermia." Will kicked off his shoes, rolled up his pant legs, and stepped into the surf. "Oh god, that's freezing! You must have frozen blue long ago, right?"

"Wimpy American." Hannibal laughed and swam towards Will. "I grew up in areas where the water was much colder and we still swam."

"My condolences." Will shivered and made his way back to shore. Even the brief moment in the water was enough for him, especially so early in the morning.

"Only the strong survive. But I'm done for today." Hannibal came strolling out of the ocean like Botticelli's Venus. Well, at least he was wearing swimming trunks, albeit very tight. Will tried not to look. His host smiled and majestically walked past him. "Come on, I'll make us breakfast before you go."

When Hannibal entered the kitchen a few minutes later, Will had to suppress a hysterical giggle. The contrast between the man who had just climbed out of the sea almost naked and the well-groomed doctor who now came to his refrigerator in a shirt and a plum-colored suit vest was downright surreal. At least he did not wear a tie.

When Hannibal gave him a questioning look, Will just shook his head and set about setting the table instead. Though Hannibal politely protested that Will was his guest.

When they were finally seated at the table, a lavish landscape of cold cuts and other delicacies spread out between them, Hannibal casually leafed through the newspaper. Will held onto his coffee mug, trying to decide between scrambled eggs and bacon and pancakes.

"Oh, there's a new exhibit at the Natural History Museum in Baltimore. Life in the deep sea." He turned the newspaper over so Will could read the ad. A formidable frogfish bared its needle-sharp teeth.

"A bit lurid, but that's the way advertising should be. Looks interesting." Will scanned the ad and smiled pensively. How often had he visited such exhibitions in his childhood? Sometimes he had to smuggle his way past the entrance because his father didn't have any money for frivolous amusements. And later, as a student, he had enjoyed the atmosphere.

"Would you like to visit the exhibition with me?" Hannibal asked with a playful smile, snapping Will out of his thoughts.

"Ah… sure, why not." He hadn't planned anything better today anyway, Will justified to himself. And what could be said against it? Hannibal Lecter was a tolerable conversationalist and it was, after all, just an exhibit at a natural history museum.

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A few days later, Will stood in despair in front of the mirror, a hysterically laughing Beverly on the phone.

"You need what?" she finally asked, gasping. Will sighed.

"A suit for a night at the opera," he explained patiently. The complete contents of his wardrobe were spread out behind him on his bed. His search for a suitable ensemble had not been crowned with success. Not that he had gotten particularly high hopes, but it could have been that there was still something to be found somewhere in the furthest corner.

"Since when do you go to the opera, Will Graham?" Beverly asked, as if she didn't know the answer.

"I've been invited. By a friend," Will said casually. Not that he had high hopes of being able to put Beverly off with it. This woman was worse than a bloodhound.

"Oh, from a friend then. Possibly the same friend who was with you in the deep sea exhibition? And who invited you to dinner? Twice? And who took you for a spin in his awesome Bentley? And-"

Will hastily interrupted her. "Yes, it was Hannibal. Satisfied? And, can you now tell me where I can get a suit from in a hurry?" Otherwise he only had the choice between his slightly worn dark blue suit, which he had bought years ago second-hand, or a refusal.

"Just leave it to me!" Beverly sounded way too excited for Will's liking, but he had no choice. While he couldn't imagine enjoying a night at the opera much, he didn't want to disappoint Hannibal or, God forbid, embarrass him in front of his acquaintances.

A few hours later he stood with Beverly in front of the facade of an elegant men's tailor and dubiously examined a purple velvet suit in the otherwise very minimalist shop window.

"I don't know, Bev. Are you really sure-"

"Yes, I am. Come on, these are professionals. Let them do their job. I'll make sure they don't disfigure you. And if we still have time later, we might even make it to the hairdresser." She grabbed his upper arm and resolutely pulled him behind her, into the shop. A bell above the door tinkled treacherously and immediately several pairs of eyes turned to them. Will gritted his teeth and let Beverly do the talking.

A little later he stood in front of a tall, narrow mirror and took a critical look at himself.

"I look like a penguin," he grumbled half-heartedly, more out of habit and spite than real distaste. He actually didn't look that bad. The suit was gray and the blue shirt that one of the tailors had silently thrust into his hands made his face look healthy rather than weathered and old.

"Well, at least you're a well-dressed penguin and your boyfriend doesn't have to be embarrassed to take you on a hot date at the opera." Beverly grinned over his shoulder and nodded contentedly.

Will sighed. "It is not-"

"Really, Will, be honest. You don't think so yourself. Admit it.” Her gaze was iron and finally Will had to lower his eyes.

"Maybe it's dates," he admitted softly, tugging at the sleeves of his shirt.

"So what. So what's your plan?"

"My plan?" Will looked up, puzzled.

"Well, he's inviting you to dinner... and to the opera... there must be something coming from you!" Beverly nudged him in the side.

Will was still eyeing his shirt sleeves critically. The cufflinks were plain, although Beverly had tried to persuade him to have them custom engraved. “I was thinking of going out on the boat at the weekend. And, well, maybe..."

"Very good idea, Graham. Then he can see you in your element.” She gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder and left him standing in front of the mirror. The tailor began staking out a few changes and Will let his mind wander.

He wasn't sure what he thought of classifying the trips he'd taken with Hannibal as dates. He hadn't been in a committed relationship for ages! His research, the regular boat trips, all filled his time wonderfully. He had a few close acquaintances and so far that had been enough for him. But now there was this odd man wearing three-piece suits in outrageous colors and patterns. Who had spent hours arguing with him about the aesthetics of deep-sea fish. Who invited him to the opera. Where should this lead? Where did he want it to lead?

He froze as a truly terrifying thought struck him. He would have to raise this issue with Hannibal! After all, he was no longer a green schoolboy who could secretly slip his crush a note. He would have to ask the man if he… Damn it! What if they weren't dates after all?

Will shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other and was promptly pricked by a pin. He whispered an apology to the tailor, who glared at him from his kneeling position on the floor, and decided to put off any further thoughts about his potential relationship with a certain Doctor until later.

The net

Chapter Notes

In this chapter I amp up the drama! Please mind the tags :)

My thanks go to my beta queuest and to all of you lovely people who left me kudos and comments, I enjoy your feedback very much <3

The boat was anchored a short distance from shore, rocking gently on the waves. Seagulls screeched shrilly and curiously circled the strange object, probably looking for something to eat. Hannibal sat in a folding chair on deck, drawing pad in hand, and sketched the shoreline.

Will sat next to him, head propped on a fist, and watched him dreamily. Was there anything the man couldn't do?

"I can not sing. And I don't know anything about cars or sports.” Hannibal said casually and Will winced. Did he really say that thought out loud?

"You drive a Bentley and you don't know anything about cars?" he asked, amazed.

Hannibal shrugged. "I liked the color. And for everything else there are professional mechanics.”

Will snorted with laughter and threw his head back, eyes closed. It was a sunny day and a light wind gently tugged at his hair. He had to remember to put sunscreen on again or they would both be badly burned tonight. Well, Will might not be that bad, but Hannibal, with his northern European complexion, was a good candidate for a bad sunburn.

The soft scratching of Hannibal's pen on the paper and the gentle lapping of the waves was almost hypnotic. Will couldn't tell how much time had passed when he opened his eyes again. Hannibal smiled at him and Will stretched long enough to cover his embarrassment. Then his gaze fell on the drawing pad and a queasy feeling spread in his stomach. His own face stared back at him from the paper, his curls dark and windblown, his eyes peacefully closed.

"You... why did you... is that-" he stammered.

"I like looking at you, Will. I find you incredibly fascinating.” How could he say that so casually? Did the man really have no idea what he was doing to Will?

"Um... thanks? I think?” Was that the moment? The opportunity he had been so nervously waiting for all day?

Actually, he had planned to have this conversation right at the beginning of their trip, but somehow he had never found the right way to start. When Hannibal got out of his car this

morning in simple trousers and a casual polo shirt and strolled over to Will with a picnic basket under his arm, he was completely speechless for a few minutes. Apparently, the man didn't just look damn good in three-piece suits.

Then he had to concentrate on maneuvering the boat safely out of the small harbor. Later they'd talked about all sorts of things, the food, the boat, Will's work and Hannibal's career, but there'd never been a good moment to ask the crucial question. And now half of the day had already passed! And yet again, at the last moment, his courage failed him. Without a word, he got up and stalked away.

Scowling at himself, Will lifted the anchor and took his place at the helm to maneuver them out of the current, which was slowly increasing with the tide. That was typical for him! When it really came down to finding the right words, he was a total failure! What would Hannibal think of him? Just walking away mutely…

He was so lost in his gloomy thoughts that he realized too late that the steady sound of the ship's propeller had changed. Only when there was a sharp crunch did he stall the engine, cursing. The boat rocked to a halt and Hannibal looked over at him in astonishment from his seat in the front.

"Something's tangled in the drive," Will called out to him, leaning over the railing. The spray initially covered what exactly it was about and only when the boat slowly turned in the current did Will realize that it was a nylon line. A bad feeling spread in his stomach area.

"It's probably just a fishing line." He tried to calm himself. But fishing line or something worse, he wouldn't be able to solve this problem by staring at it. With a deep sigh, he trotted over to his box of supplies.

"It appears to be a cord. I have to get in the water to cut us loose," he explained to Hannibal as he climbed into a wetsuit.

"Can I help you?"

"Not for now. You can take the cord from me as soon as I free the propeller. I couldn't see how long the line was or if anything else was attached to it." Will clipped a diving knife to his belt and donned a diving mask and snorkel. He wouldn't need a large tank of oxygen, since he wasn't planning on staying under water for long. So he only took a small emergency cartridge with him.

Finally, he strapped his fins to his feet, slouched clumsily to the rail, and clambered down into the water. Despite the neoprene suit, he felt the cold in his bones. Hopefully it was just a short cord.

When he ducked his head under the waterline and realized the full extent of the catastrophe, he almost felt sick. The thin thread caught in his propeller was part of a ghost net. He reappeared and briefly spat out the snorkel to curse heartily.

"No fishing line?" asked Hannibal, leaning on the railing above him. Will shook his head and ducked back down to assess the situation.

The net was still relatively new, the edges were a bit frayed in some places, but all in all intact. Some plastic bags were already hanging from the lines and algae and seaweed were tangled at the bottom where the current had dragged the net across the rocky bottom. Only a few dead fish could be seen. A tender hope spread in Will. Maybe he could remove this net before it did more damage! He grabbed the mesh and pulled with all his might. The net was heavy, and floating freely in the water, Will had no means of support, but it seemed possible that with Hannibal's help he could get it out of the water.

He reappeared and looked up at Hannibal. The doctor frowned slightly at him as if trying to make a decision. Will forbade himself to think about anything other than the task at hand.

"It's an old fishing net," he explained curtly. "It can do a lot of damage if we leave it here, so I'd like to get it out of the water. Can you throw me one of the ropes off the bow, please? And tie the other end to the railing?"

Hannibal complied and a short time later Will was snorkeling around the net, searching. It seemed to be stuck to the bottom somewhere, at least they could not get it out easily. The water wasn't too deep, he could see down to the bottom of the sea. Presumably the net got caught somewhere down there between the rocks. He briefly considered climbing back on board to get a larger scuba tank, but decided against it. With the small cartridge he had a good twenty minutes of air, which should be enough to dive quickly, loosen the net and come back to the surface.

As he slid down, he let his eyes wander critically over the net. Here and there there was a silver flash, apparently fish hooks had gotten caught in the tangle of cords. They were as big as his hand and the barbs glinted menacingly in the low light. When he had free time, which unfortunately was seldom enough, Will liked to go fishing himself. He couldn't bring himself to buy commercially caught fish, so sea creatures would only serve his table if he could be sure they had been caught under reasonable circumstances, with the least possible harm to the environment.

Deeper, always deeper. He felt the pressure on his ears and consciously breathed in and out to protect his eardrums. A burst eardrum was the last thing he needed right now. The net swayed gently in the current, and out of the corner of his eye Will saw one of the fish faintly struggling. But he didn't have time to save a single fish that would likely die of stress minutes later. As he approached the first shell-covered rocks, Will began to unravel the web. In some places he also had to use his diving knife when the knots already were too tight.

He had just cut through the last strands when a dark shadow passed over him. Will flinched and reflexively ducked between the rocks. Sharks rarely got big enough around here to harm a human, but he didn't want to take chances. The medium-sized dogfish was not interested in Will at all, but in the fish wriggling in the net, which must have seemed like an easy meal to him.

Hastily, Will pushed himself off the seabed and blew out a burst of air bubbles to scare the shark away. Apparently the latter hadn't noticed him at all and now whirled around hastily. It was a beautiful animal, a good three feet long, with bright spots on its back and a long, asymmetrical tail fin that swept frantically through the water. Will, in turn, kicked his flippers to avoid getting in the way of the fleeing animal.

Only when a fishing hook pierced his shoulder from behind did he realize how close he had come to the net and at that moment it was already too late. The fold of the net he had just cut loose wrapped itself around him like a veil as, carried by his own momentum, he drifted into the ghost net.

"Bev will hold that against me forever," was his first thought. The second, immediately following, was a heartfelt "Fuck!" It was only with great effort that he suppressed the impulse to fight his way out of the net as quickly as possible. That would only make it worse. So he took two deep breaths and started pushing the net away from him again. With the folds that had descended on him from above, that was doing just fine, but the part of the web that was behind him was proving stubborn. Apparently the stitches got caught in his diving belt and also drilled into his wetsuit with the help of the fish hooks. He was stuck.

Will tried to calm down. He'd just loosened the net to the bottom, so maybe he could just swim to the surface with the whole damn thing and ask Hannibal to help him? It would be embarrassing, but he'd survived worse humiliation. Gingerly, he gathered the net a little and kicked his fins to float upwards.

It seemed to work for a moment, but halfway to the surface, a jolt stopped him. Apparently the net was stuck somewhere else. Will fumbled for his diving knife. He was slowly running out of breath. If in doubt, he would later have to make a second dive with the big compressed air tank to recover the rest of the net-

His hand felt only empty space at his side. The dive knife was no longer on his belt.

The small knot in his stomach grew bigger and bigger and a cold shiver ran down his spine. Really, you'd think he'd had enough near-death experiences in the past few weeks!

Before he could decide how to proceed, however, movement on the surface caught his attention. Apparently Hannibal had decided to come to his aid. He swam down to Will without much equipment, just a pair of goggles and a snorkel. Will blinked. How long has he been underwater? How much air did he have left? His thoughts were heavy as lead and a small part of his mind realized that he didn't have much time.

Hannibal had reached him and apparently he understood the problem, because he checked first the part of the net that led to the seabed, then the mesh where Will was tangled. In doing so, however, he pushed the fishhook deeper into Will's back and the biologist cried out reflexively. Air bubbles rose, wasted precious breath. Will watched them go. It seemed to him that his chest was tightening. The small emergency cartridge must be almost empty.

Apparently Hannibal ran out of air, too, and with powerful swimming movements he returned to the surface, only to immediately dive back down to Will. Will followed him with his eyes. The surface seemed so close, only a few meters! And yet as inaccessible as the bottom of the Mariana Trench. In the meantime Hannibal had come back to him, his movements were calm and he seemed highly concentrated. Will smiled weakly and gingerly put a hand on his arm. Their eyes met and Will gently shook his head. It didn't help if Hannibal also got caught up in the net, he tried to communicate to him. Will had known the risk, yet ignored all precautions. It was his own fault.

Hannibal frowned and increased his efforts, but it was in vain. Will's vision began to darken from the edges. His lungs worked frantically, but the compressed air in the small cartridge was finally used up. The folds of netting he had gathered slipped from his hands and slowly descended down his legs.

Fingers ran through Will's hair and he opened his eyes. When did he close them? He did not know. Hannibal's pale face floated in front of him, his fair hair like a halo around his head. The sunlight streaming through the water from above gave him a strangely unreal aura. He gently pulled the now useless mouthpiece out from between Will's lips and pressed his mouth to Will's. The touch lasted only a short time, then Hannibal took one last, loving look and swam away. Back up to the surface.

Will closed his eyes and fought the breathing reflex that was getting stronger. His chest burned, his head pounded. He tried to focus on that last kiss, the first and last he would ever share with Hannibal. A part of him triumphed over the fact that, against all odds, he had apparently been able to win the heart of this wonderful human being. But at the same time he was filled with a deep regret that they had only had so little time together. And that Hannibal would now carry the trauma of this day with him.

A strange collection of disjointed thoughts swirled in his head. He hoped that Beverly would posthumously publish the unpublished papers that were gathering dust on his hard drive. It was good work, he just never found the time to put it through the lengthy peer review process. And he wondered if Hannibal the orca was okay. Whether he had joined a new group or whether he had made the long journey home to northern Europe in search of his dead family. Will deeply regretted that he would never know.

As if from far away, he heard the creaking, squeaking call of an orca. Will smiled and sank into the darkness.

The Sky

Chapter Notes

We (and Will) are getting closer to the truth!

Thank all of you lovely people who left me kudos and comments, I enjoy your feedback very much.
And of course many thanks to my beta queuest for the marvelous support and the motivation all the way until the end!

A violent jolt made Will jump. His eyes opened reflexively.

At first he didn't understand what he was seeing. Black and white blotches, a gigantic shadow ripping and tugging at the net. Something seemed to give way because suddenly the water around Will started to move. The bottom of the sea came towards him– no, it wasn't the bottom of the sea– under his hands he felt smooth skin and powerful muscles and then he went up, faster and faster until his head broke the surface.

His lungs seemed to explode, he coughed and gasped, tears ran down his face. Was that real? Was he alive or dead? Was this what it felt like to die?

The water foamed around him and only when he heard the typical hissing sound did he realize what had saved him. He was lying across the back of an orca for the second time in his life.

Feeling slowly returned to his arms and legs. He straightened, hands resting carefully on the rubbery whale skin. His fingers turned red, and the spray that splashed on his face had a slight red tinge. Uncomprehending, Will looked at the bloody furrows in the orca's back. There were three that ran almost parallel. It took a moment for him to connect the wounds to the numerous fish hooks that had been in the ghost net.

Said net still hung from his back like an ugly cloak and suddenly Will felt the searing pain from the fishhook stuck in his shoulder. He cursed, gritted his teeth and breathed deeply and evenly. He had to get out of the water, he had to recover the net…

Luckily the boat was almost within reach. The rope they had used to attach the net to the rail now served as Will's anchor. He held on to it with difficulty until he was able to stand up balancing on the orca's back. Then he pulled himself and the net over the rail and landed with a rough thud on the deck.

Suddenly he felt sick. Now that he was safe, it all hit him, the fear of death, the adrenaline, the desperation, and he threw up. Stars danced before his eyes and he trembled all over.

“That's the shock, Will. Everything will be fine. You are alive. You live. Everything is fine.” Gentle hands cupped his face, brushed the hair out of his eyes. Will blinked. He was lying on

the deck, Hannibal kneeling beside him. He didn't know how much time had passed.

"What happened?" he asked, confused. His voice was hoarse and his throat hurt. In fact, his whole body ached. His head was pounding like he had a terrible hangover.

"You almost drowned trying to recover an old fishing net." Hannibal sounded calm and composed, but the fingers that were helping Will to sit up were shaking just a little.

"I thought I was dead for a moment," Will admitted. He was cold and shaking all over. He rested his head on Hannibal's bare shoulder and closed his eyes. Just for a brief moment, just to collect himself a little.

"You're alive, Will." Hannibal's quiet murmur seemed to soothe himself as much as Will. The Doctor gently took him in his arms and pulled him to his chest. His heartbeat sounded calm and steady in Will's ear.

"Did you save me?" Will whispered without opening his eyes. A tiny bit of warmth slowly returned to his body, seeming to transfer from Hannibal to him.

"Naturally."

Will lifted his head and cautiously opened his eyes. An uncomfortable pain still throbbed behind his temples. "I don't remember…" Should he be worried about that?

"That's the shock. And probably the lack of oxygen." Hannibal seamlessly switched back to a cool, professional tone. He took Will's head between his hands and searched his eyes, probably to check the pupillary reflex.

Will couldn't help but smile. "Will I survive, Doc?"

"I guess so. However, a visit to the hospital is advisable."

Will wrinkled his nose. "Do I really have to?" he asked. He knew he probably sounded like a whiny kid, but he hated hospitals! The smell, the impersonal, sterile furnishings all gave him nasty goosebumps.

"Lack of oxygen can cause brain cells to die. And you might have water in your lungs," Hannibal said, raising his index finger in an instructive manner. "You should remain under constant surveillance for at least 24 hours. Either in the hospital or you can come with me."

He did not have to think long about that! Will felt for Hannibal's hand and squeezed it lightly. Then something occurred to him. "There was an orca. He tore the net." The net he was still caught in! Will was starting to understand what a mackerel must feel like and he hated it.

Hannibal frowned. "You must be wrong, Will."

Will looked up in surprise. "What? No, I'm quite sure!" He could still see the unmistakable markings in front of him!

"Well, from what I know about orcas, they are impossible to miss. And I haven't seen an orca."

Had he imagined the orca? A hallucination caused by lack of oxygen? Will let Hannibal wrap him in a large towel and then sat patiently in the sun while the doctor freed him from the net, peeled the wetsuit off his torso and carefully removed the fishhook from his shoulder. His curls fell in his face and as he reached up to push them back he noticed the bloodstains. The entire palm of his hand was a rusty reddish brown, as if he'd been propping himself on a blood-smeared surface.

A disturbing image flashed before his inner eye. Three long lacerations in black, rubbery skin that oozed blood. Reddish spray that spattered his face. The orca had been real! Why did Hannibal lie to him? Or had he actually not seen the whale?

Will couldn't remember getting back on board. Had Hannibal helped him, or had he climbed over the railing under his own steam? There was a big black hole in his memory. It couldn't have been that long ago, the puddles on deck hadn't had a chance to dry yet. Probably also a result of the lack of oxygen on his poor brain cells, which Hannibal was so worried about.

Hannibal had the entire contents of the ancient first-aid kit spread out around him and was muttering sullenly to himself. Apparently his standards weren't met, which Will found hilariously amusing. He tried valiantly to keep his expression neutral. But it was also a surreal image, the otherwise well-groomed and well-dressed Doctor Lecter kneeling in bathing trunks and a polo shirt turned inside out amid cheaply packaged steep towels and shaky rolled-up gauze bandages. In addition, he made a facial expression as if someone had just announced to him that he was only allowed to eat fast food for the rest of his life. Will had the impulse to take a quick picture. Such a sight was certainly rare.

Eventually, he was as doctored as his meager circumstances would allow. Hannibal gently laid a hand on his poorly bandaged shoulder. "Come on, you should put on some dry clothes. And then you're going to have to tell me how to get this boat back to port safely. Because you're not in the condition to drive."

"Is that your medical assessment, Doctor Lecter?" Will allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, the open wetsuit flapping damply around his waist.

"Absolutely." Hannibal stepped closer and Will felt a gentle flutter in the pit of his stomach. The doctor's maroon eyes reflected his own relief and the euphoria made Will almost dizzy. He was alive!

Then Hannibal kissed him and every thought left Will's mind.

Actually, it wasn't their first kiss, but Will decided at that moment that the brief touch underwater under the looming sword of Damocles didn't really count. This kiss was better! Which could also be because there was no need to interrupt it.

Hannibal's lips were thin but soft and very tentative at first, as if unsure if Will would approve of his approach. To dispel any doubts, Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's neck and pulled him closer so that their bodies were snuggled together from top to bottom.

After a period of time that seemed infinitely long and at the same time far too short, Hannibal finally lifted his head and looked at him lovingly, one hand gently placed on his cheek. "I just found you, Will. Almost losing you again so quickly was an experience I don't want to repeat."

Will nod enter. "I'll be more careful in the future," he said, hoping that he would be able to keep that promise. Beverly had often accused him of his careless, almost thoughtless behavior and it hadn't compelled him to change. But now that he might have someone waiting for him at home…

"I hope so!" Hannibal looked at him meaningfully, as if he could read Will's mind. Will felt his face flush.

"Please don't tell Beverly?" he said, attempting pleading puppy-dog eyes. "I made some really really stupid mistakes today and if she finds out about them she'll never let me go in the water alone again." Not to mention the lecture, which he would also like to do without.

"If you're a good patient and follow the dictates of your doctor, I will refrain from making a big deal out of your behavior," Hannibal said, planting a quick, short kiss on his lips. "And the first order is that you change into something dry as soon as possible. The last thing you need is a cold. Or a bladder infection."

Will gave a playful salute and trotted over to the pile of clothes that lay neatly folded on the bench, waiting for him. Much neater than he had left it. With a smile he peeled off the wetsuit, which could probably be disposed of thanks to the wide tear in the shoulder. There was also the emergency cartridge and the diving knife that he had lost somewhere down there. He would need to buy almost a whole new set of equipment all at once. Great... But at least they had recovered a ghost net!

Meanwhile, Hannibal had cleaned up the deck and neatly stowed away the remains of the first-aid kit. Will came up behind him and hugged him, his head resting on Hannibal's shoulder.

"Your shirt is turned inside out," he informed him happily.

Hannibal looked down at himself and chuckled. "Oh dear, thanks for the tip. I was a little distracted earlier."

Since Will hadn't even noticed when Hannibal put the thing on, he couldn't blame him. And actually it didn't bother him that much, he just said what was going through his head at that moment.

"You still look good," he assured Hannibal.

He gently broke away from the hug and turned to Will with a smile. "That may be so, but I want to try to keep a certain level of fashion. It doesn't matter where I am." Hannibal gave him a playful wink and pulled the polo shirt over his head. Will only had a moment to admire the flexing muscles in his upper arms. Then Hannibal turned a little to the side, distracted by a seagull that seemed interested in the blood-smeared fishhook that the Doctor had recently removed from Will's shoulder.

Three deep scratches ran almost parallel to each other across Hannibal's broad back. They weren't bleeding, but they were clearly fresh, scabs just beginning to form around the edges. Will's ears rang, he tasted metallic spray on his tongue and saw the black skin of an orca crossed by three deep wounds caused by fishing hooks. His gaze slid from Hannibal's back to his own palm, which was still stained rusty red.

The Secret

Chapter Notes

Attention please:
You might have noticed that this is a series now :D
There will be some bonus scenes, deleted scenes and alternate storylines. To keep things orderly, those will go in their own little entry as to not clutter this fic :)

Thank all of you lovely people who left me kudos and comments, I enjoy your feedback very much.
And of course many thanks to my beta queuest for the marvelous support and the motivation all the way until the end!

For the rest of the day, Will was taciturn and withdrawn. He had briefly explained to Hannibal how to steer the boat safely back to port, then wrapped himself in a blanket and brooded on the small bench in front of the wheelhouse. Hannibal didn't seem bothered by this, probably thinking it was a side effect of the shock. Which, admittedly, it partly was. But only in part.

Will was aware that he didn't have all the pieces of the puzzle. But usually you did not need all the parts to get a rough idea of what the finished picture would look like in the end. In this case, however, some very crucial pieces were missing, and he was sure that Hannibal was purposely keeping those pieces of the puzzle from him. And he had a sneaking suspicion that the puzzle had a second image on the other side that looked completely different from the front.

After pushing the metaphor to the limit on the way to Hannibal's house, he allowed Hannibal to tuck him into bed and mother him to his heart's content. Hannibal cooked him a chicken soup made from a special kind of chicken, which he said was a recipe he learned from his Japanese aunt. The detailed culinary explanation completely went over Will's head, but the soup tasted great, like everything that came from Hannibal's kitchen. Warm and with a sweet pungency that lifted his spirits a little.

After dozing off in Hannibal's guest room, he felt reasonably stable again and able to take a closer look at the situation he found himself in. He was almost certain that Hannibal had saved him from drowning today. But he was just as sure that he had seen an orca that had brought him and the net to the surface. Had Hannibal been that orca himself, or had he somehow summoned it? The three deep scratches on the animal's back corresponded exactly to the wounds on Hannibal's back, supporting the first theory.

Will had no idea how a person could turn into a multi-ton animal, but after everything he'd seen in his life, he didn't want to rule out the possibility. After all, there were many phenomena that science had not yet been able to explain. Maybe this was one of them? People who could turn into animals... Will grabbed his laptop, which Hannibal had helpfully put next to the bed, and started a short research.

The transformation of people into animals and vice versa was an integral part of many legends and fairy tales, but it was mostly beautiful young women who turned into either swans or seals. However, Will doubted that Hannibal was carrying a cape made out of killer whale skin. It didn't go with his fashion style. But the parallels could not be overlooked.

Will leaned back against the pillows and mused to himself. A notification popped up in the bottom corner of the screen. Apparently there were new posts on one of Will's forums. Someone had started a new channel for orca videos and it seemed a lot of people had dug up material.

Lost in thought, Will clicked through the videos. There were some impressive aerial shots of various groups of orcas chasing large whales. Even more exciting were the images of a small pod off Punta Norte, Argentina, hunting seals on land by throwing themselves into the surf and nearly stranding. That must have been a terrifying feeling!

A small documentary showed snippets of an orca female teaching the trick to a younger member of her school. When the calf first lay on the steep sloping footing, it let out a piercing, plaintive whistle that pierced Will to the marrow. The volume was amazing, even considering the bulk of the young whale.

The door to Will's room banged open with such force that it hit the wall with a loud crack. Will flinched and the laptop he was balancing on his lap almost fell to the floor. Will was able to hold onto it at the last moment. Puzzled, he put the device down on the bed next to him before looking up.

"What's going on?" he asked in surprise. Hannibal was standing in the door, white as a sheet. He still had an apron tied around his waist, so apparently he'd stumbled out of the kitchen and, judging by his breathing rate, sprinted up the stairs.

Concerned, Will pushed the covers aside and stood up. "Are you all right? Did something happen?"

"I thought I heard something." Hannibal seemed to regain his composure. He ran his hand nervously through his hair. Apparently he had just processed herbs, some small green leaves got stuck in the silvery strands.

"Oh sorry I didn't realize I had the volume up that high. Just watching a few videos posted on one of my usual forums.” Will gave him a soothing smile and reached up to pluck bits of herb from Hannibal's otherwise orderly hairdo.

Hannibal sighed deeply and Will could almost see him putting on his usual facade again. It was impressive and unsettling at the same time. As if Hannibal had built a shell that he presented to the world. What made him drop that charade, even for a moment?

As Hannibal made his way back into the kitchen, Will returned to the video he had been watching earlier. It was old material that someone had dug up from an archive. Apparently there were only a very small number of killer whales who knew the stranding-yourself-trick and it was always passed from mother to calf. However, not every animal in the group mastered the maneuver, it was mainly performed by young cows. There used to be a larger male that could get stranded, but this one hadn't been sighted for a long time.

Will stared blankly at the forum post. His thoughts raced, the pieces of the puzzle tumbled wildly and when they came to rest, a new, unexpected picture emerged. He slowly swiped his finger across the screen and brought up a search bar. A few clicks later he had the old pictures of a male orca in front of him. Halfway up the towering dorsal fin was a prominent notch.

"Hannibal..." Will whispered breathlessly. A terrible foreboding spread through him. But before he could be sure, he needed more information.

Dare he call someone for help? Rather not. If he was wrong– no, even if he was right, he didn't want his host to know about it early. But he had his laptop and Beverly was online at the most unlikely times. Maybe he was lucky.

He hastily wrote an email, hopefully not formulated too confusingly, and sent it off with a prayer. The email to Jack took a little longer, but he didn't want to get a surprised call back. Or, even worse, Jack asking Hannibal. It would probably be easier to get certain things out of Jack in a face-to-face conversation, but Will didn't have time for that right now. He just had to hope that Jack would trust him.

With a deep sigh, Will closed the laptop and went downstairs to the kitchen. All he could do now was wait for new information and that was always easier when he distracted himself. And watching Hannibal in his natural habitat was always a good distraction.

The kitchen smelled of ginger and lemongrass.

"Another recipe from your aunt?" Will asked, leaning against the door frame. Hannibal looked up from the piece of meat he was marinating and smiled. The smile seemed oddly sad to Will, maybe a little wistful.

"An old family recipe," said Hannibal. "My mother used to cook it when I was sick. Ginger helps to prevent colds."

Will sat on a bar stool on the other side of the kitchen island, put his head in his hands and watched the preparations. Hannibal's hands darted over the various ingredients, chopping, slicing, mixing, seasoning. It reminded Will of a dance, constantly moving but always with a certainty and determination that told the viewer that there was a plan that all aspects followed.

The end result was a tender roast that Will was able to break up with a fork. It was garnished with a thick sauce that smelled of spices. The conversation was slow to get going, they were both lost in thought and the evening came to an early end. Hannibal walked Will to the door of his room and planted a soft kiss on his lips. Before Will could decide how to react, it was already over.

Initially, Will had trouble calming his thoughts. He stared at the ceiling, where the shadows of the trees outside the window cast intricate patterns. Eventually he must have nodded off, because he woke up completely drowsy when the door to his room opened.

"Hannibal?" Will asked, rubbing his sleep-dry eyes. At first there was no answer, but finally Hannibal entered the room. His bare feet made no noise on the carpet, he might as well have been a ghost.

"I just wanted to make sure everything was okay," Hannibal said softly, stepping over to Will's bed. At that moment, Will was reminded of a child sneaking into his parents' bedroom after a nightmare. Without thinking too much, he rolled onto his side and lifted the covers invitingly. After a moment's hesitation, Hannibal slipped into bed with him.

It was warm and cozy under the covers. Will felt the silky fabric of Hannibal's pajamas on his bare legs. Unusual, but somehow also nice.

"I'm fine," he whispered, feeling Hannibal's shaky breath take in next to him. Apparently he was right in his assumption. "You saved me. It's all right." Gently, he inched closer so that their shoulders touched.

Hannibal remained silent, but after a moment he put his hand on Will's chest. It rose and fell with Will's even breathing. Smiling, Will fell asleep again.

When he woke up he was alone in bed, but the imprint on the pillow next to him left no doubt that he hadn't been dreaming.

At breakfast, Hannibal was himself again, courteous and hospitable. He served Will a sumptuous meal and then happily ordered him to an afternoon nap, even though it wasn't even midday yet. Will didn't resist but decided to take this opportunity to check his mail.

Beverly had answered him last night, Jack this morning. While they were both puzzled by his vague request, they readily shared everything they knew. Admittedly, it wasn't much, but it filled in some gaps in Will's theory.

According to Beverly's contacts, Doctor Hannibal Lecter had started working as an emergency room surgeon at Baltimore State Hospital a good seven years ago. He had previously worked at various hospitals on the East Coast, apparently emigrating to America shortly after completing his studies in Europe. Then, a few years ago, he'd resigned for family reasons and wasn't seen again until recently, appearing out of nowhere.

Jack was able to break down more precisely when Hannibal had disappeared from his usual social circles. The window of opportunity was just over two years and according to Jack's wife, who had known Hannibal personally, this was totally unexpected. A brief visit to his family in Europe had turned into an absence of several years during which no one had heard from him.

Will effortlessly fitted these new puzzle pieces into his overall picture. Hannibal had family in Europe, judging by his slight Eastern European Accent. He had visited them and this visit had led to an absence of several years. And now that he was back, he hardly spoke of his family, nor were there any pictures of them anywhere.

The dates matched the documents from the Verger case shockingly well. If Hannibal really was the orca that Will had rescued from the aquarium, then there was a horrible suspicion that the other orcas in his pod had also been humans. People killed by the ignorant whalers that Hannibal couldn't save. Hannibal's family.

Will scrolled through the forums looking for the original post that started the whole thing. A little post about a dead orca calf. Maybe Hannibal's niece? A cousin? Was the age of the human

who turned the same age as the orca he became? Maybe not, he would have guessed Hannibal the orca a lot younger than Doctor Hannibal Lecter.

But now he was at the point where he had to make a decision. Should he just ignore the whole thing? Act like he didn’t know anything? Waiting to see if Hannibal said something of his own accord or eventually made a mistake that was so blatant that Will couldn't ignore it anymore?

But Hannibal needed help! He had suffered terrible trauma and had been imprisoned for years. The chances were good that sooner or later he would have a breakdown. The memory of the veterinarian Hannibal had drowned went through Will with an icy cold. An innocent human whose only fault was being part of the system that held Hannibal prisoner. Doctor Gideon hadn't been directly involved in the death of Hannibal's family, but Will could understand that the anger and desperation had found an outlet. A normal person might have gotten drunk and started a bar fight. Hannibal hadn't had that opportunity.

None of this made it any better or change the fact that Hannibal was a murderer, but Will decided to take the extenuating circumstances into account. There was no way that normal human justice could hold Hannibal accountable, so he would have to make his own decision. Go or stay? Force a debate, or live with the lie?

Beverly always knew immediately when he was hiding something from her. According to her, he had absolutely no poker face and so it was to be feared that Hannibal would soon realize that something was bothering him. Lying to him wasn't an option for Will either, he was a terribly bad liar. And just end the relationship and never see Hannibal again? Just the thought made Will go cold. Even in the uncertain phase, where he hadn't exactly known whether he and Hannibal were in a relationship or not, he had been more content and happier than ever before. No, simply turning your back on Hannibal wasn't an option either.

All he could do was speak openly. And he wasn't sure if he would survive this one.

Although Hannibal had just saved his life, he couldn't tell how the man would react to a confrontation. To keep his secret, Hannibal had endured two years in captivity with no prospect of liberation. And Will was only too well aware of the potential for violence that lay hidden in the well-groomed doctor.

These thoughts ran through his mind as he carefully erased all traces of his research from his laptop. While his internet history held no direct clues to the mystery he'd stumbled into, he didn't want to put Hannibal at any unnecessary risk. The documents on the Verger case were on his hard drive at uni, but there was no direct connection and it would only attract additional attention if he tried to make them disappear. After all, he wasn't the only one who had access to the files.

Finally he closed the laptop with a deep sigh. The way down the stairs seemed unusually long and yet much too short. He had no idea how to broach the subject. How do you ask someone if they could turn into a whale?

When he entered the library, Hannibal had just sat down at his piano. He smiled at Will. His jacket hung over the arm of the chair and he had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. The silky white fabric stretched across his broad shoulders.

Will voiced the first thought that popped into his head.

"How did you get the bloodstains out of the shirt?"

Hannibal froze. Then he slowly tilted his head to one side and regarded Will with a cold, calculating gaze.

"What do you mean, Will?" His voice was calm and betrayed nothing of his thoughts, as did his face, frozen in a polite mask. Will shuddered, but he couldn't turn back now.

"You have three scratches on your back. From the fishing hooks in the ghost net," he explained and could see exactly the moment in which Hannibal understood what he meant.

Before he could think of an excuse, Will continued mercilessly. Now that he had started, he wanted to get it over with. "You lifted me out of the water and my hands were covered with blood. Your blood. I know you are the orca."

"Impressively clever, my dear Will." Hannibal rose and stepped towards Will. His movements were smooth and predatory. He kept his hands at his sides, open and harmless. Will didn't let that fool him. Hannibal was dangerous, and his next words would probably determine if he survived this unscathed.

"You took a great risk to save me." Will's voice sounded much calmer than he actually felt.

"I couldn't let you drown. Not after-' Hannibal paused, apparently not sure how much Will actually knew. Did he connect all the dots correctly?

"After I freed you from the aquarium." Will completed the sentence for him. "I don't think I had a choice. I would have saved the orca in any case, I could never have left you there. Besides, you saved me there too. After Verger pushed me into the water. Without you I would have drowned."

Hannibal blinked slowly, as if vaguely familiar with these events. For a brief moment, Will thought he was wrong, but then Hannibal nodded slowly.

"Yes, also because of that." He slowly approached Will, who reflexively dodged to the side. Away from the door, the immediate escape route. Hannibal circled menacingly around him, literally driving him in front of him.

"I take it you don't want to publicize your extraordinary talent?" Will tried to continue the conversation. He had the uneasy feeling that the only thing stopping Hannibal from launching a direct attack was the conversation. After all, it would be extremely impolite to interrupt someone like that.

"Indeed. Unfortunately, it turns out that humanity doesn't get along well with anything that's considered 'different'."

"I know that." He didn't have room to retreat any further. There were bookshelves behind him, the sofa blocked his way to the side. He was trapped. Now all he could do was flee forward. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward and placed a hand on Hannibal's chest. He blinked, amazed, and stopped.

"Is there anything I can do to convince you of my trustworthiness?" Will asked him quietly. "I'll take your secret to the grave, but I'd really prefer not to have to do it right away."

A snort of laughter escaped Hannibal, and the unsettling intensity he'd been exuding like a somber aura eased somewhat. He looked at Will as if seeing him properly for the first time.

"I'm not human, Will."

Will had to smile. "I'm inclined to consider that one of your assets."

"You realize I can't trust you just like that," Hannibal said, putting a hand on Will's shoulder.

"Naturally. But trust can be earned." Will sounded more confident than he actually felt. But at least he was alive!

"When are you expected back at the university?" Hannibal asked thoughtfully and Will felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

He swallowed but answered truthfully. "Not until the beginning of the semester. Beverly might miss me sooner, but..."

"Of course. That gives us some time." Hannibal suddenly smiled, as if he hadn't clearly planned Will's untimely demise a few minutes ago. "Come on, let's eat something first. Planning is better with a full stomach."

Distracted by this sudden turn of events, Will allowed himself to be led unresistingly into the dining room. Hannibal pushed him into a chair and then disappeared into the kitchen. Will decided to take this as a good sign. Whatever he had to do to gain Hannibal's trust, he would do it. And that seemed like a good first step. No hectic, thoughtless attempt to escape. What for? Nobody would believe him. He hardly believed it himself.

Hannibal emerged from the kitchen, two elaborately arranged plates in one hand and an open bottle of wine in the other. It was a roast of sorts, thickly cut slices of meat under a dark brown sauce.

"Don't you like fish? I've noticed that you cook a lot with meat, but never with seafood." Not that Will was complaining. Everything Hannibal served tasted great, even though he barely knew the name of most things. He sipped at the wine that Hannibal had poured for him, which as usual went perfectly with the meal.

Hannibal shrugged elegantly. "I've eaten a lot of fish over the last few years. I like them in general, but you know the methods used to catch fish commercially."

"Yes, unfortunately only too well." Will thought of the ghost net and shuddered. "I'd rather catch my own fish than buy it. Maybe I could go fishing for us sometime?" Will took another sip of wine. He suddenly felt a little dizzy.

Hannibal gave him an unreadable look. "That's a nice thought."

The fork slipped from Will's fingers and landed on the plate with a melodic clink. Will opened his mouth, but couldn't get a word out. His field of vision darkened and he had a strange ringing

in his ears. He saw Hannibal rise and step beside him, felt gentle fingers run through his hair. Then Will sank into a bottomless darkness.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

This is it, folks! Thank you for comming all this way with me!

The biggest of all thanks goes to my wonderful beta queuest and the lovely, talented AomaSade, who made coverart for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Doctor Hannibal Lecter drifted aimlessly through the crowd. Magnificent evening dresses glittered around him, above them a sea of stars from electric candles in ancient chandeliers. Opera was something he particularly missed during his imprisonment. Not only the music, but also the atmosphere. The conversations, the artfully formulated taunts, the intrigues. A very special kind of shark tank. He smiled charmingly at an old friend without stopping his slow glide.

The excitement and undisguised curiosity at his disappearance and equally unannounced return had now completely subsided, replaced by a new, juicy scandal of one sort or another.

"Hannibal! My dear, how nice to see you here tonight!" Mrs. Komeda floated up to him and blew a kiss next to his cheek. He wasn't going to get away from this conversation that easily, so he took it with humor. She was one of the people he missed the most, a part of his old life that was still there. Unchangeable and reliable like the rhythm of the tides.

"I wouldn't have missed this evening, even if the weather is terrible though I dread the drive home a little," he said, looking at one of the tall windows against which the rain was constantly lashing. They had had some heavy summer thunderstorms in the last few days and it had cooled down noticeably.

"That's what you get for living so far out. Why don't you have a city apartment like any sensible person?" Ms. Komeda mischievously raised her index finger and tapped him on the chest, as if calling an unreasonable schoolboy to order.

Hannibal just smiled mildly. "I'm addicted to the view." Also, all of the neighbors were far enough away to be unaware of what was happening on his property.

Frau Komeda lowered her voice conspiratorially. "And there's more space, too, isn't there? Where is your dashing young man? I haven't seen him in a while."

Hannibal, who had just sipped his champagne, had to use all his self-control not to make a face. "Will is in the middle of a critical phase in his research. He sends his apologies."

"Oh Humbug! You probably just don't want to share his attention with us. Young love, I know how it is." She patted his arm understandingly. "Well then, keep guarding him, your Will. But I

expect you to host one of your great dinners in good time so I can have a serious word with him."

Hannibal bowed his head in agreement. "I'll try to plan one as soon as possible," he lied effortlessly.

The evening ended without further critical questions. Unfortunately, after several minutes of staring into a torrent of rain, Hannibal had to realize that it would not be possible for him to cover the distance to his house that night without risk. He was forced to stay in a hotel.

The next morning he left the hotel without breakfast and drove home at a leisurely pace, softly humming the final aria of the night before. There were fallen trees by the side of the road and twice he had to take a detour because landslides blocked parts of his usual route.

When he finally arrived the sun was already high in the cloudless sky. He parked the Bentley and walked around the house into the garden. A high, plaintive whistle greeted him.

"I know I'm late," he replied, stepping to the edge of the natural pond. The bottlenose dolphin inside reared up and splashed water around itself. Hannibal sighed as salt water stained his suit.

"Well, I think I deserved that." The suit would have been dry cleaned anyway.

Still not calmed down, the dolphin dived down and circled sullenly in the spacious pool, whirled up sand and snapped at the small fish, which frantically fled.

"She was worried about you," Will explained, getting up from the comfortable wicker chair that belonged to an ensemble of furniture next to the pond. He held out the coffee cup he was holding. Hannibal gratefully took a sip, he just couldn't get down the sludge that was served as coffee at the hotel.

He gave the pouting dolphin an apologetic look. "I warned you-"

Will put a hand on his shoulder. "That doesn't stop us from worrying. The weather was terrible and we know your penchant for dramatic gestures. But now you're home again. Sit down for a moment, I'll bring you your breakfast."

"It's not necessary, I can-"

"Hannibal. Sit down. It's no hassle for me, and Abby missed you. Talk to her, while I make breakfast.” Will gave him a kiss on the cheek and walked up to the house.

At this hour, a meal was more like brunch, but Hannibal knew that arguing wouldn't help. With a small groan, he dropped onto the wicker chair and watched the bottlenose dolphin at his little outburst of temper.

The young dolphin was found injured and stranded on the shore. She had first been taken to the National Aquarium in Baltimore, where Will had discovered her. How Will had known that the disturbed animal wasn't a normal bottlenose dolphin he hadn't been able to explain to Hannibal. But he had been so convinced that Hannibal finally let himself be persuaded and now the young female dolphin lived in his garden. The small, naturally designed pond was a temporary solution until she was healthy enough to return to the sea.

Hannibal sipped his coffee and pulled out a rolled-up newspaper he'd picked up from the hotel lobby this morning.

"It was a really nice evening, weather aside," he said to Abby, flipping through the headlines. “Mrs. Komeda asked for Will, as she always does. I should persuade him to accompany me again occasionally.” The paper crackled softly in the light wind. Abby swam in circles, pretending not to be interested in his story, but he caught a glimpse of her trying to get a look at the colorful, full-page photos.

Hannibal suppressed a smile and turned the page. “Oh, that young singer was there too. Again with another young lady. Well, what can one say. At least he has a good tailor.”

Abby chattered angrily and tossed her head. Hannibal put down the newspaper and looked down at her. Their eyes met. He didn't dare to say anything, possibly breaking her concentration, but after a moment of tense silence she let out a frustrated, high-pitched scream and abruptly dove again.

Will came up to him, tray in hand. "I think she'll be ready soon," he said.

"Some things just take time." Hannibal nodded and put the newspaper aside so Will could put his burden down. “And everyone has to process a trauma at their own pace.”

Unfortunately, they didn't know anything concrete, but Abby's unwillingness or inability to change back into a human and the wounds that the young dolphin had sustained, a theory could be constructed that points to an attack. The deep wound on her neck was now healed, as were the abrasions on her stomach and fins she had sustained on the beach. Now all they had to do was wait and keep giving the young girl incentives to return to human life.

And if none of that worked, Will had promised the dolphin to take her back to the sea at the end of the summer so she could decide for herself how the rest of her life should go.

Hannibal savored the omelet Will had prepared for him and happily listened to his partner's scathing comments on the tabloid headlines.

The sun was shining, the sea roared behind the walls of the garden and Hannibal felt a deep sense of perfection.

Chapter End Notes

If you think that there is something missing: You are right! I fought and fought with the last chapter but was never happy with it, so I decided to just cut it out.
It will be posted seperately, if you are interested, otherwise you are free to let your imagination go wild :)

A big thank you to all of you who left me comments and kudos, I had so much fun doing research and writing this fic! I have some material left over, so there will be some bonus chapters or maybe little storys comming in this series.

Until next time!

Works inspired by this one

Cover and banner for Hannibal the killer whale/Hannibal der Killerwal by AomaSade

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!